



1st.夢回す銀槍

Kyohei Iwai

岩井恭平

# ムシウタ

M U S H I - U T A  
bug

角川スニーカー文庫

# Novel Illustrations



# ムシウタ

MU SHI-UTA  
bug  
1st. 夢回す銀槍



岩井恭平

MUSHI-VTA bug



虫憑きに会って、  
どうしても確かめたいことがあるの。

01. 夢回す銀槍



MUSHI-VTA bug

裏切られた。そう思ったことは、ある—？



02. 夢紡ぐ夜歌

MUSHI-VTA bug

自分の夢のために、  
他の虫憑きの夢を奪っていくしかない。  
そんなオレが――

03. 夢沈む休日



ねえ、教えて……  
死なないってどんな気持ちなの？

# 04. 夢託す狩人



# ムシウタ

MU SHI-UTA

bug

1st.夢回す銀槍



## 薬屋大助

Daisuke Kusuriya



## 花城摩理

Mari Hanasiro



1年前に病死した亜梨子の親友。死後、亜梨子にモルフォ蝶が付きまとうようになった。

## 一之黒亜梨子

Arisu Ichinokuro



ホルス聖城学園中等部2年生。旧家の伝統に従い武術全般をたたき込まれた、戦うお嬢様。



Characters of  
**MUSHIUTA**  
bug



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1st.  
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# Episode 01. The Silver Spear of Dream's Continuation

Even now, she still remembers it very clearly.

That scene from one year ago.

A memory from when her close friend, Hanashiro Mari, was still alive.

“.....Yeah, I know it for sure.”

Standing before the hospital room, Arisu heard her voice. Mari was speaking with somebody. However, Arisu couldn't hear the other party, only Mari talking by herself.

“Because Arisu is kind, even for my request, she will.....”

Arisu opened the door to the hospital room.

Blinded by the bright morning sun, she covered her eyes with her arm reflexively.

“Arisu.”

Arisu would probably never forget that scene her entire life.

Silver wings seemed to sprout from the back of the girl lying on the bed. The small wings belonged to an out of season Morpho butterfly.

There was not a soul to be seen in the room apart from Mari. This made Arisu wonder for a moment, but it was more important for her to return a smile to Mari. Even for just one more second, even just an instant, she did not want to waste any time with Mari.

“Hey Arisu, listen to me. I am.....”

As Mari narrowed her eyes and spoke, the silver Morpho butterfly spreaded its wings and took flight.

# Part 1

Walking down the road under the relentless morning rays, Ichinokuro Arisu let out a big yawn.

She came to a halt in front of a big puddle. Looking at the mirror-like surface, she saw her figure in the reflection.

A pair of sleepy half-opened eyes stared back at her. Her shoulder-length hair was maintained meticulously by a barber employed by the Ichinokuro house once every three days. Even amongst her peers, she was considered to be quite petite.

Arisu took a big stride, jumping over the puddle which other people would have avoided.

In the direction which Arisu was walking, there were lots of boys and girls wearing the same uniform as her. However, none of them had a sleepy look on their face apart from her. Everybody was walking upright and chatting with each other with a bright smile on their face.

Arisu was presently heading towards Horusu Seijou Academy Middle School. The school was average academically, but its tuition fee was outrageously expensive. In other words, it was a prestigious school for the upper-class. Arisu was fourteen years-old, currently enrolled as a second-year student there.

Seeing two familiar figures ahead, Arisu rushed towards them.

“Sup, Ena, Takako!”

Arisu leapt between the two girls, coiling her arms around their shoulder and causing them to stumble.

“Hey. Or rather, aren’t you being too energetic in the morning.”

“G-good morning, Arisu-san.”



One of the girl pouted, while the other had a troubled smile.

They are Saionji Ena and Kujou Takako, Arisu's classmate. Both of them are from influential families, especially Takako who was raised with an abundance of love and care since young. On the other hand, being the third daughter, Ena had an even more coarse personality than Arisu.

Arisu let go of their shoulders, letting out a groan with a, 'uu...'.

"My energy is at just the right level. After all, I had just been beaten up by the demonic hag since early this morning."

"Ah, you mean your self-defence practice? I guess it can't be helped, seeing as how you are the precious only daughter of the Ichinokuro family, much bigger and wealthier than our families. They're just worried that you might get kidnapped."

"If that's the case, they could have just drop me off at school every day. Instead of being strict on discipline in such a way, geez."

"Maybe hiring a bodyguard would be a good idea."

At Takako's words, Arisu revealed an interested look.

"A bodyguard eh..... That might be fine too."

"Eh? Seriously?"

"Since my family has nothing but money, they could at least do this much. This way, I wouldn't have to undergo all these strict practice."

"Eeh, but you'd be with stuck with some ominous-looking fellow all the time!"

*"That's not right!* Obviously, I'd only pick a pretty boy! Even in school, he will always be by my side, obeying my every command. 'Ah, my throat is feeling a bit dry.' 'Please drink this, my lady.' 'Fufu, good boy.' Ah, why didn't I think of this earlier!"

"Just who do you think you are..... Well, I guess that might not be such a bad idea."

"But, then....."

Seeing Takako blush, a grin formed on Arisu's face. Looking at Ena, she found

the same look on her face as well.

“Eh, did you hear that, Arisu-san?”

“Yup, I heard it loud and clear, Ena-san. ‘*But, then.....*’, wasn't it. It seems like just imagining it was too much for our chaste lady Takako.”

“That’s not it. It’s just that Takako-san already has someone in mind. What was his name again, you know, that childhood friend with a baby face from the Arts club.....”

“H-hey, stop picking on me.....”

Watching the panicky Takako glance at them back and forth, Arisu and Ena laughed out loud.

But then, Ena’s laughter stopped all of a sudden.

“What’s wrong, Ena?”

“Ah, sorry. Speaking of pick on, I recalled something unpleasant.”

“Something..... unpleasant?”

In contrast to the look of question on Arisu and Takako's face, Ena had a frown.

“I heard this from my friend last night over the phone..... Yesterday, after class ended, *it* appeared in our school.”

“*It* appeared? What is it?”

“*Mushi.*”

*Thump thump—*

Arisu’s heartbeat accelerated.

—Hey Arisu, listen to me. I am.....

That scene from the past smouldering in the back of her memories came to her in flash. Even now, it seems as if it would disappear any moment, but she recalled the smile of happiness of her former close friend.

“She had also heard it second-handed, so I have no idea if it's true or not.”

Ena continued.



“Somewhere in the school, a bunch of boys were ganging up on someone. Then, suddenly, the Mushi appeared..... As a result, a few of them were severely injured..... The one who witnessed it was so scared that they did not dare tell anybody what they saw, only to the friend of my friend.”

*Mushi—.*

Something only mentioned in passing rumours, first heard about ten years ago.

Outlandish organisms with the appearance of insects, the Mushi infests humans and feed on their dream to grow. Despite multiple eyewitness reports from various sources, the government officially deny their existence. But, as eyewitness reports continued, people afflicted by the Mushi, known as *Mushitsuki*, came to strike fear in the hearts of the populace. Rumours say that the Mushi consumes the dreams of their host up till the day they die.

Along with the issue of the Mushi which has since passed the level of gossips, there were hearsay of a government agency known as the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau. Officially, the bureau is said to handle any issues or complains about the living environments, but.....

“Please keep this off the record, 'kay. ....Leaving aside Takako, I didn't expect Arisu to be making this kind of face too.”

“Eh.....”

At that, Arisu snapped out of her daze. She had been listening with her eyes goggly, similar to Takako, causing Ena to come to the conclusion that she had been frightened.

“There, there, sorry for scaring you. So even Arisu-chan have a girlish side to her, eh..... Ow-ow-ow.”

“Ohohoho, that’s right. Somewhere within me, there's a weak and delicate girl.”





While drilling Ena's temple with both of her fists, Arisu noticed that Takako looked strange.

"E-erm, I....."

"Takako?"

"I saw a suspicious character..... That is, inside the school compound....."

""Really?!""

Arisu and Ena both exclaimed. Takako nodded docilely.

"Suspicious you say, in what way?"

"Erm, that is..... it was a scary-looking giant..... also, he seems middle-aged....."

"Hey, isn't this bad? What if that person was..... a Mushitsuki?"

Takako looked aghast, while Ena's expression turned serious.

Mushitsuki—.

Arisu silently clenched her fist.

"A suspicious character..... Mushitsuki....."

During the short homeroom later that morning, they heard directly from the form teacher that a few boys from the same grade had been sent to the hospital due to serious injuries.

## Part 2

The chime reverberated in the quiet school building.

The time was just past three in the afternoon. Afternoon classes had just started and would end at six pm.

With a '*kreen*', the door to the girl's toilet opened.

"....."

Sticking her head just beyond the door, Arisu spied at the surroundings.

The compound of Horusu Seijou Academy Middle School was separated into several buildings. The central block had a clocktower with a classic western-style exterior, while the special classrooms were located in the east block. On the other side, the staff room and gymnasium was situated in the west block which had a modernism design. In addition, the dojo, pool and many other facilities were housed in detached blocks.

Arisu was currently in the east block. She had already verified that by five pm, the classrooms in the second and third floors would no longer be used. She had feigned illness and sneaked into the toilet since the break.

After making sure that there was no one, she came out to the corridor.

As she let out a '*fuu*', a butterfly appeared out of nowhere and circled around her.

Shimmering with a brilliant silver lustre from its wings, it was a Morpho butterfly. —If one looked closely however, they would realise that it was not a normal butterfly. Arisu did not know of any other butterfly which had four antennae.

The Morpho butterfly fluttered towards the stairway.

"I know, Mari. I will definitely find a Mushitsuki....."



Muttering to herself, Arisu renewed her spirit.

As Arisu walked up the stairway, she found the passage obstructed by a tape. On the side of the tape were the words, 'No Trespassing', along with the insignia of the Akamaki City Police Department. In addition, a stand bearing the signature of the chairman of the academy with the words, 'No Entry', was placed in front of the tape.

*"Yotto~"*

Ignoring the stand, Arisu jumped over the rope. The Morpho butterfly had already disappeared somewhere along the third floor.

Since the morning, several police patrol cars could be seen outside the main gate. However, by lunch break, not a single patrol car remained. She had thought that that seemed quite hasty, but perhaps on-site investigations had already been completed last night.

Arisu took a look around the silent third floor.

*".....!"*

What she saw made her took in a deep breath.

There were signs of wanton destruction all along the corridor. All the windows were smashed, and the floor, ceiling, and the door to the Arts room were all wrecked. She would have thought that an explosion had occurred here, but that wasn't it. There were what seemed to be gigantic claw marks gouged into the concrete.

Arisu gulped. She did not know what had happened here, but Ena's words about the Mushi came into her mind.

*"This..... shouldn't be the work of the Film Studies club, right? .....I don't think they would be so elaborate."*

The artworks by the Arts club hanging on the side of the corridor were left in miserable shapes. A painting of the sunset fallen on the ground attracted her sight, but there were large slashes on it as expected. The picture frame which was a present from a sister school was pretty much smashed, with the sign bearing the name "Tachibana R." being all that remained.

Weaving her way around the debris, it was right when Arisu was approaching the Arts room.

“.....Yeah, I think that I would be able to find him soon. I already know that he is a member of the Arts club.”

A voice could be heard coming from the ruined Arts room. Arisu immediately stopped and held her breath.

“He can’t escape. I would definitely find him—”

The voice sounded young, belonging to that of a teenage boy. He seemed to be speaking to somebody, but there was no reply from the other party.

Arisu recalled Takako’s witness account of a suspicious character. Suppressing the sound of her footsteps, she turned back towards the locker with the cleaning supplies and opened it.

What she retrieved from within was a mop with a long handle. Holding the stem, she began twisting the pole, silently dismantling the mop.

During class time, just who.....?

Arisu nervously approached the Arts room with the pole in hand.

The owner of the voice was still talking to somebody when all of a sudden, his voice stopped.

“—Is someone there?”

I was discovered—the moment Arisu thought so, she moved. Kicking the door open, she sprang into the Arts room.

In the room, a teenage boy was shocked eyes wide open. He was wearing the Horusu Seijou Academy uniform and held a mobile phone in his hand.

*“Seyaa~!”*

Faced with a horizontal strike across, the boy narrowly dodged under with a look of surprise.

However, seeing the boy flusteredly move backwards to avoid the blow, Arisu dexterously manipulated the pole to sweep at the boy’s feet.

*“Uwaa!”*



The tip of the pole hit the boy's knee from the back, causing him to tumble backwards.

—The Ichinokuro house was a pedigree from the Edo period. Using the skills honed since the warring era, Arisu displayed the techniques she was trained in each morning. Ever since she had been aware, she has had various martial arts beaten into her by her strict instructor, varying from Aikido to using a naginata.

“Don't move!”

Releasing those barbed words, she thrust the tip of the pole at the boy who had fallen on his rear end.



Dumbfounded, the boy looked up at Arisu.

He looked to be around the same age as Arisu. Stature-wise, he was about the same as the other male students of his age. There was also nothing suspicious about his external appearance. However, there was Takako's testimonial. As the situation is, she cannot let her guard down in front of any stranger. An uncommon ringtone came from the mobile phone in his hand.

"You, what's your name?"

"What....."

As if not understanding the situation, the boy tried to stand up.

"I said, don't move!"

"Ouch!"

Arisu poked his forehead with the pole.

"You understand now? You can only answer my questions. Any movements and you will get it from me."

Arisu declared her intentions resolutely. Faced with her one-sided demand, the boy lapsed into silence unhappily.

"Name?"

Arisu resumed her interrogation. The boy looked away in disgruntlement, looking like a child at his rebellious age.

"Before asking for the name of others, shouldn't you give yours first.....  
Ouch!"

"I don't remember stooping to the level of a suspicious character. Now, talk."

"I don't want to."

"....."

"Ow, ow. Hey, stop that!"

".....Well, fine. It's not like I'm interested in your name anyway."

Striking at the boy's face repeatedly, Arisu changed her question.

"Next question. Who are you? What are you doing at this place when you are

supposed to be in class?”

“.....Nothing in particular. I was just playing truant, idling around. That’s when you—”

“Are you a student of this school?”

“That’s right. See, I have the student’s handbook.”

The boy took out a student’s handbook from his pocket, opening it for Arisu to see. There was a red access card in the notebook. Due to the strict security of the school, access cards were stringently regulated. Entry to the school requires the scanning of the access card. This applied to both students and teaching staffs, and all movement in and out of the school were recorded.

After examining the handbook, Arisu glared at the boy.

“This is fake!”

“What? That’s not possible!”

“The colour of the authentic card is yellow, while yours is red.”

“Huh?”

Seeing his reaction, Arisu was sure of it. The card was indeed supposed to be red.

“.....I knew it, you are not a student of the school.”

Realising that he was tricked, the boy rubbed his head.

‘To think I was fooled by such a childish trick.....’, the boy seemed to mutter to himself in dismay.

“Just what are you doing here? Answer me honestly.”

“That has nothing to do with you.”

It appears that he would resist Arisu till the very end. ‘Perhaps I should just beat his head in’, thought Arisu, but she took a deep breath and restrained herself.

“Fine then, one last question for you.”

After taking a short breath, she asked.



“Are you a Mushitsuki?”

“.....!”

The boy’s complexion clearly changed.

Seeing his overreaction, Arisu’s heartbeat hastened and her eyes widened.

“R-really.....? You really are a Mushitsuki?”

In the next instant, the boy moved.

Taking advantage of the moment while Arisu was stunned, he swatted the pole away. In the moment she muttered, ‘Ah!’, the boy had used the momentum of a back roll to jump onto his feet.

He now stood face to face with Arisu. Hiding her rapidly throbbing heartbeat, Arisu readied her stance.

“Yesterday’s incident, were you responsible for that too?”

Arisu was sure now. From the way he moved, it was evident that he wasn't any ordinary person.

“.....”

The boy’s expression changed distinctly. Unlike the rebellious look he had earlier, he was now observing Arisu with cold eyes.

“The witness in yesterday's incident said that they saw a Mushi.”

Not getting caught up in his mood, Arisu shouted out loud.

“Also, my friend said she saw someone suspicious in school. A scary-looking male giant..... who was middle-aged..... but I don't see anyone like that..... huh?”

“Hmph.”

The boy seemed to sneer at Arisu.

“If I was the Mushitsuki, that would mean that I was the one who gravely injured all those students, you know?”

“.....!”

“—If I said that, what would you do?”

Arisu gulped.

“Don't tell me that you thought you could take down the evil-doer with one hit from the pole?”

Under the chilly gaze of the boy, Arisu bit her lips.

“T-that's not what I was going to do.”

“Then, what are you going to do?”

“There's something..... that I must know no matter what.”

Narrowing her eyes slightly, Arisu said.

“There's something that I must confirm by meeting with a Mushitsuki. That's why, I have been searching for a Mushitsuki, ever since one year ago.....”

The boy went silent. But, he immediately opened his mouth again and replied her coldly.

“Do you really believe that Mushitsuki exists?”

“They do!”

“If they really exist, that would mean that they would meet their end when their dream is completely consumed by the Mushi. Even if they survive, they would have been taken away by some scary people.”

“Scary people?”

“The Special Environmental Preservation Bureau.....”

The boy muttered. Arisu tilted her head in confusion.

The Special Environmental Preservation Bureau. Apart from being the agency that handled cases relating to the Mushi and Mushitsuki, there were no other information about them. However, the rumour-loving Ena once spoke about it.

The Special Environmental Preservation Bureau..... the SEPB in short, in fact, they concealed the existence of Mushitsuki from the public. They also used Mushitsuki to hunt for other Mushitsuki and such—.

“Either way.”

At the boy's words, Arisu came to from her thoughts.

“If you are planning on getting involved with such flippant attitude, you better stop now.”

“What flippant attitude. I absolutely have to meet a Mushitsuki even if I have to risk my life.”

“A spoiled young lady like yourself would probably never understand.”

The boy sneered at her scornfully.

“In this shitty dog-eat-dog world, there are those who would sacrifice anyone if meant their survival. Those who do not want to sacrifice anything, they just run and run away, barely scraping along their lives. ....And also, there are plenty of people who would do anything to live, no matter how hated they become or how dirty their hands would get. Those who say that they are fine with dying, have no value even in death.”

As if filled with anger at the whole world, the boy spoke with intense hatred in his voice. Overpowered by his speech, Arisu was dumbstruck. Still sneering, the boy proceeded to leave the venue.

“.....You probably don't know of this either.”

Arisu said.

“Wanting to live but is unable to, thus having no choice but to entrust her dream to others..... there are people who live like that too.”

“.....”

“Those who have been entrusted with that dream have the responsibility to carry it till the bitter end.”

“.....I don't need you to tell me that—”

As if he recalled something, a look of anger formed on the boy's face.

It was right that moment.

A scream came from somewhere.

## Part 3

Following the scream, there was the sound of glass breaking.

“.....!”

Arisu reflexively dashed out to the corridor. Right after, an announcement echoed through the school. Looking at the central block, she saw the moment the windows on the second floor shattered.

Turning her head, her eyes met the boy's.

“.....”

In contrast to Arisu's solemn expression, the boy glared back as calm as a cucumber.

Arisu was first to look away. Turning her back to the boy, she ran down the corridor.

The disturbance had come from the second floor of the central block, the same floor as that of Arisu's classroom. Rushing down the passage, she saw the students and teachers forming a crowd ahead.

Pushing her way through the crowd, what she saw made her speechless.

Several students were collapsed on the floor. The walls of the classroom were riddled with holes, as if something has taken multiple bites out of it. Furthermore, shattered glass littered the floor.

A male student was bleeding profusely from his shoulder. While it did not seem to be life-threatening, his face appeared blank as a teacher propped him up.

“.....Mushi.....”

One of the student standing around in shock muttered. Hearing that, Arisu's expression changed.



*“Uwaa.....! It hurts.....!”*

*“It was a big monster! It must be a Mushi!”*

The boy who was injured shouted with a look of pain. Supporting the student, the teacher tried to calm him down. Around them, panicky students just crowded around the teacher.

Mushi..... just who—.

All of a sudden, Arisu was assaulted by a fit of coldness.

*“.....!”*

She turned her head around.

There, she found a gaze filled with animosity piercing through her.

Behind her stood the mysterious boy she met at the Arts room earlier. Under his unpleasant cold gaze, a shiver ran down Arisu’s frozen legs.

As I thought, this person knows something—.

She unconsciously exerted more strength into her clenched fist.

*“As I thought, you are a Mushitsuki—”*

*“Two people from this class are in the Arts club. One is collapsed over there while the other is.....”*

Ignoring her, the boy muttered under his breath. He was not looking at Arisu, his line of sight extending to beyond her.

Arisu pursued his gaze.

*“.....Eh.....”*

Arisu unconsciously leaked an utter.

A male student was standing in front of the door to the ruined classroom. Similar to Arisu just now, he was rooted to the spot by the boy’s frosty glare.

*“You’re pushing your luck, Harimoto Jun.”*

At the boy’s penetratingly cold mutterings, the male student reacted. Visibly flustered, he ran down the corridor as if to escape.

The boy immediately chased after Harimoto Jun.

“Hey..... wait.....”

Snapping out of her daze, Arisu promptly tried to follow them.

“Arisu!”

For some reason, students from other classes came running down the corridor as well. Ena was calling out to Arisu. However, Takako’s figure was nowhere to be seen.

Ignoring Ena who was calling her, Arisu ran down the corridor where she came from.

“W-wait up! Harimoto-kun too.....!”

She shouted at the two whose figures could not be seen already. However, Arisu immediately took in a breath.

The wall right beyond the bottom of the staircase had been reduced to rubble. Beyond the fragmented concrete, the fence could be seen to be broken through forcefully as well.

“Does this mean that..... Harimoto-kun is a Mushitsuki as well.....?”

She had been wondering whether the mysterious boy was a Mushitsuki or not. And now, there seems to be even more trouble. Arisu had known of the male student called Harimoto Jun since prior. The reason being—.

“.....!”

Jumping through the hole into the backyard, Arisu could hear the sound of cloth fluttering.

Looking to her side, she saw a shadowy figure standing in the distance.

It was a person clad in a jet black long coat that covered till his legs. Just before he put on a large goggles that seemed to cover the entirety of his face, he looked in her direction.

It was the boy whom Arisu suspected to be a Mushitsuki. He glared at Arisu with a look completely different from the one he had previously before hiding his face behind the goggles.

Much to Arisu's surprise, he jumped over the fence with unimaginable leg strength. His long coat fluttered behind him and his figure quickly disappeared beyond the fence.

"Wha-....."

Out of nowhere, a butterfly landed on Arisu's shoulder. It was the silver Morpho butterfly.

Biting her lips, Arisu broke into a run. However, a voice called her to a stop.

"Arisu-san....."

When Arisu turned around, she was faced with a girl with an agonised look.

## Part 4

“There was..... a woman. No, I cannot even tell if it was human or not.”

In a taxi going down the street, Kujou Takako looked down as she spoke.

The scene witnessed by Takako was as follows.

—Hey, won’t you please tell me your dream?

The voice seemed to belong to a woman.

The location was at Harimoto Jun’s house. Takako had been passing through a gate to enter the vast premises.

His house grew herbs and poplars, as a result, there was always a pleasant fragrance throughout the air. However, at that moment, the usual fragrance was completely gone. Furthermore, the house was deathly quiet.

Jun was standing stock still in the centre of the courtyard.

As if hiding his figure, a woman with a tall stature was whispering into his ears. Takako saw the side profile of the woman dressed in a bright red coat and wearing round sunglasses.

—You don’t have to suppress your desires anymore. Now, tell me. What do you want to do right now?

She heard her whispering voice.

—I..... I want.....

A black distortion started to form by the side of the boy. He looked to be suffering, but it soon transformed into ecstasy as he trembled. A portion of the distortion seemed to solidify into the leg of an insect.

Then, the line of sight of the sunglasses wearing woman shifted. She glanced at Takako with a mysterious glint in her eyes.



Horried, Takako ran away—.

“That was the day before yesterday.....”

Said Takako as she trembled in fear.

“Do you think that woman turned Harimoto-kun into a Mushitsuki?”

Sitting next to Takako, Arisu enquired, causing her to shudder. That was probably the reaction to hearing the word, ‘Mushitsuki’.

Harimoto Jun was Takako’s childhood friend; he was like a brotherly figure to her. As their families had long ties with each other and socialised often, they naturally had plenty of chances to interact. Both Arisu and Ena knew that as well.

“At that time, I could not believe what I was seeing..... No, that wasn’t it, I just didn't want to believe it.”

“.....”

“Listening to what Ena-san said this morning, I was shocked. Although Jun-san did not show it in front of me, I have heard rumours that he was being severely bullied during his club activities. Perhaps—thinking of that, I can't help but want to reach out to him.....”

“A suspicious male giant, that was actually a lie, right..... I should have realised it from the start. After all, you were always so bad at lying.”

“Jun-san must have been suffering..... but he could not ask anyone for help..... It must have been tough..... And then, of all things, he sought salvation from such a suspicious entity.....”

Arisu clenched her fists.

An existence that gives birth to Mushitsuki.

“Because of that thing, there are Mushitsuki.....”

The reason behind Arisu’s search for a Mushitsuki.

Just what are Mushitsuki—?

Arisu bit down on her molars; all she had now were more questions. Even if what Takako said true, then who was that boy in the black coat? At least, there

were no doubts that he was no ordinary pedestrian.

The Special Environmental Preservation Bureau.

She thought back on what the boy mentioned. Did that have something to do with him?

The taxi stopped.

After paying the fare, the girls alighted.

“Is Harimoto-kun really here?”

“.....When the construction work started, the two of us sometimes sneaked out here to play. Before the building is completed, there would definitely be no one that would think to look for us here.....”

Looking up, they saw a high-rise building with its back facing the evening rays. It was a building shaped in a ‘ㄣ’ built in the development area close to the coastline. The management of the building belonged to Takako’s father’s company, who had hoped that the building would be the starting point for the city’s new development.

The building, which would open in a few months time, was installed with lightings everywhere which lit up at night. At the space in the middle of the ‘ㄣ’, there was an observation deck with a spherical roof.

The fence made of barbed wires had a portion of it ripped apart, and there were shoe prints left in the brand-new asphalt road.

“Bingo. Let’s go.”

Takako grasped Arisu’s hand just as she was about to move off and she stopped.

“Erm..... why are you doing this? Shouldn’t this be..... left to the police.....”

“Do you want the police to be involved?”

Takako thought about it, then immediately shook her head. Arisu gave her a smile.

“That’s why, leave this to me. I also have a reason to meet him, to confirm something.”

“To confirm..... something?”

“Mushitsuki, just what in the world are they?”

Saying so, Arisu grinned at Takako, causing her to stare back in puzzlement.

“The two of you are in the way. Don't move from here.”

The voice came from right next to them. Startled, they turned to face the voice.

“You.....!”

The boy clad in the black coat stood there.

“You won't get off with just a small injury if you meddle in this unnecessarily.”

Saying so coldly, the boy with his face hidden by the goggles walked past them.

However, Arisu gripped his arm, stopping him.

“You followed us, didn't you?”

“.....”

“What are you going to do to Harimoto-kun? Don't tell me, you are going to kill—”

At Arisu's words, Takako visibly paled.

“I won't kill him. After killing his Mushi, he will just turn into a Fallen.”

“.....Fallen?”

“An empty shell devoid of dreams and emotions..... still a much better outcome than dying from having his dream completely eaten by his Mushi. After turning into a Fallen, he would be brought to an isolation facility.”

“You..... just who are you really?”

Arisu asked, but was only greeted by silence in return. Forcefully shaking her arm off, the boy climbed over the fence.

However, a figure threw itself at the boy from behind. It was Takako. Clinging desperately to the boy, she shouted.

“A-Arisu-san.....!”

“Nice one, Takako!”

Taking advantage of the opening, Arisu leapt over the broken fence. Ignoring the boy clicking his tongue in annoyance, she sped towards the building.

Weaving in between the spotlights, Arisu saw that the front entrance of the building was open. She dashed inside without hesitation.

The inside of the building was dark and gloomy. The only light came from the setting sun through the windows, lighting up a section of the floor.

In order for her to speak to Jun, Arisu needed to reach him before the boy did. She surveyed the surroundings, looking for the figure of Jun.

However, she did not feel the presence of anybody within the vicinity.

She started to grow impatient. The building boasted of having a large floor area. If she searched blindly without a plan, the likelihoods of her finding him was low.

The silver Morpho butterfly flew into her sight.

“Mari.....”

It circled around her head briefly, before flying into the interior of the building.

“.....”

Arisu took a deep breath. After calming down, she picked up a pipe lying around the entrance.

Following behind the Morpho butterfly, Arisu arrived at the tenth floor.

Catching her breath at the mouth of the staircase, Arisu heard a voice coming from within the floor.

“Who is it.....?”

Hearing the voice, Arisu tensed her body.

Walking discreetly along the aisle, what she saw beyond the corner caused her to widen her eyes.



The room had probably been intended to be an office for some enterprise. Amongst the desks placed haphazardly in the room, a boy stood alone. It was Harimoto Jun.

However, when she looked closely, she realised that it wasn't just Jun. Next to him, a weird looking monster was lying amongst the desks as if that was its nest. It had antennas coming out of its head as well as eight squirming legs. At one glance of the shell shining with a black lustre, one could recognise it as a Rhinoceros beetle. What differed however, was the sheer size of it, as the beetle towered over three times the height of Jun.

That is a Mushi—?

Cold sweat formed on Arisu's forehead.

"Hello, Harimoto-kun. I am Ichinokuro Arisu. I'm a friend of Takako, have you heard of me?"

"Takako's friend.....?"

Jun said in a low voice. Seeing the cold glare in the boy's side profile lit by the setting sun, Arisu felt a chill down her back.

"What would her friend be doing here.....?"

"Obviously, that's to stop you. I don't know about your plan to take revenge on those bullying you, but that should have been enough to dispel your anger, no? Also, Takako is worried about you."

".....Pff."

The boy broke out into a slight smile, and the Mushi next to him slowly raised its body.

"I don't want to. There's still three of them remaining."

"How silly."

".....What did you say?"

"If you wanted revenge, you should have done so by your own hands. Using that sort of thing to injure others, are you satisfied now? This way, aren't you just accepting the fact that you're weak."

Arisu declared flatly.

“Did you become a Mushitsuki just to undertake such a silly revenge? Being a Mushitsuki, that must mean that you have a dream too, right?”

“Don’t tell me that you thought that all dreams would be something beautiful.”

Jun laughed out loud.

Arisu’s breathing halted. The boy’s laughter oozed with such malice that anyone would be appalled.

This person, is different—.

Arisu unconsciously came to a conclusion.

He is completely different from the Mushitsuki that I knew—.

Arisu met a certain Mushitsuki in the past. That person was the exact opposite of this boy; she always had a gentle smile on her face.

“Kill her.”



Obeying the boy's command, the Mushi rushed at Arisu.

Snapping out of her daze, Arisu readied the pipe.

Her palms started to sweat. She did not think that the pipe she was holding would be able to damage the gigantic Mushi. She must get past the Mushi somehow and knock Jun unconscious. —Although she has no idea what would happen to the Mushi whose host fainted, she could not think of any other idea.

*“Kuu!”*

Arisu blocked the leg swung down by the Mushi with the pipe. However, there was no way her small frame could stop the blow and she was sent flying backwards.

Arisu somehow managed to land on her feet, but the Mushi's mandibles reached her instantly.

*“Seyaa!”*

Rolling to her side to avoid the fangs, Arisu swung down the pipe at the Mushi's head. It felt as though she had hit a rock, causing her arm to turn numb.

The large eyes of the Mushi glared angrily at Arisu, and it struck out at Arisu with its front leg again. Arisu reflexively jumped forward, rolling on the floor and putting some distance between her and the Mushi.

Making use of the momentum of the forward roll, Arisu jumped up and dashed towards Jun.

*“Uu.....!”*

The boy flinched. But, immediately after, the floor was dominated by the Mushi's ear-splitting howl.

Along with the thunderous roar, it flung several of the room's furnishings towards Arisu.

*“Kyaa—”*

Besides shattering the glass windows, a desk crashed into Arisu. Arisu bowled on the floor before slamming into the wall.

*“.....Uu.....u.....”*

It was a miracle that Arisu was still holding onto the pipe. Her whole body was screaming in pain, and she fell back to her knees after trying to stand on her shivering legs.

The Mushi moved in to attack Arisu who was trying to prop herself up with the pipe.

As if moving in slow-motion, the looming fangs of the Mushi was seared into her eyes.

—Mari—.

What came into Arisu's mind as she resigned herself to death was the smile of her late friend.

The girl had spoken of her dream joyfully. Sadly, she never had the time to fulfil her dream before she passed away.

Right before she passed away, Mari had said this to Arisu.

—Hey Arisu, listen to me. I am actually.....

She displayed no signs of dread or grief at dying as she spoke.

—My dream, can I entrust it to you?

Mari always had a silver-coloured Morpho butterfly around her.

She had also been—a Mushitsuki.

“.....!”

A silver light descended between Arisu and the Mushi.

With a brilliant pattern on its wings, it was the Morpho butterfly. Jun's Mushi came to a halt, as if it was scared of the Morpho butterfly.

The Morpho butterfly flew towards Arisu and landed on top of the pipe in her hand.

“!”

The wings of the Morpho butterfly distorted, turning into numerous feelers that wrapped and embedded itself into the pipe, becoming one with it.

As Arisu looked on in astonishment, her hands held a silver spear. The

antenna of the Morpho butterfly entwined around the pipe like ivy, forming an engraved pattern that exuded magnificence. Of the four wings spread out broadly, one of it transformed into a sparkling blade.

“Wha-.....”

The Mushi broke out of its stupor and swung down its leg at the speechless Arisu.

“.....You this!”

Arisu swung the spear instinctively.

In the next moment, the silver spear sliced through the Mushi’s leg easily.

Furthermore, the spear released a gale of scales which gouged a huge crevice on the ground. The impact sent some of the furniture and glass pieces flying past Jun and out of the building.

“Kuu.....!”

Jun’s face twisted in pain and he ran out further down the corridor. His Mushi followed along, hobbling along with its remaining seven legs.

“W-wait up!”

Briefly stunned at the power of the spear, Arisu immediately came to her senses and chased after the boy.

Jun seemed to have ascended the building from a staircase further within the floor. Arisu could hear the sound of footsteps and the Mushi’s groans coming from above. Holding the spear in one hand, she pursued them up the stairs.

“.....”

As she ran up the stairs, Arisu examined the spear.

The Morpho butterfly that was always around Arisu had been her late friend’s Mushi. Ever since the sickly girl passed away, the Morpho butterfly started to appear by her side.

“Mari.....”

Arisu called out. However, there was no response from the silver spear. Up till now, no matter how many times Arisu called out to the silver Morpho butterfly,



it had not responded.

—My dream, can I entrust it to you?

Mari's last wish. Those words, just what did they mean? Why did the Morpho butterfly appear around Arisu's side? Just what are Mushitsuki? —In order to get an answer, Arisu searched high and low for a Mushitsuki.

However, when she finally found a Mushitsuki after all the trouble, the person in question, Harimoto Jun was far different from Mari. Arisu's anger boiled at the existence that had transformed him in such manner.

A sudden wind breezed through her hair.

At the end of the stairwell, the door there laid in pieces; they had reached the rooftop. Jun and his Mushi presumably went ahead.

The outside was blanketed in the darkness of the night.

The night breeze blew across the bleak rooftop, with the laser-like illumination from below slicing through the sky in arcs.

Jun was standing right at the edge of the rooftop. Arisu walked towards him.

“Harimoto-kun.....”

Even though he was cornered, Jun still looked calm. He glared at Arisu with cold eyes burning with spite.

“What is your true wish? Surely that Mushi wasn't just born from your desire for revenge, right?”

“You speak as if you know of other Mushitsuki. And it seems that the one you knew was a good person.”

Arisu did not respond to Jun's reply.

“I didn't think of anything other than revenge.....”

Jun's expression unexpectedly softened. With a smile that could be said to be gentle, he spoke.

“Let's begin. I am going to thoroughly destroy everything around me.....!”

Arisu was shocked wide-eyed. Seeing her reaction, Jun let out a strange

laughter.

“I can’t believe that there are actually people with this kind of dream’—that’s precisely the look on your face. But you know, Mushitsuki like me are a dime a dozen everywhere. That, I know for sure.”

Looking at the boy, Arisu felt suffocated for some reason. Whether it was out of fear or if it was sadness, she did not know. However—.

“You big idiot.....!”

Arisu murmured as she glared at Jun.

“I have some questions for you. The woman that turned you into a Mushitsuki..... Just what is it exactly?”

Jun raised his face in surprise. After thinking for a while, he answered in a low voice.

“.....She called herself *Oogui*.”

*Oogui*<sup>[1]</sup>.

Arisu burned that name into her memory.

“So it’s her fault that Mushitsuki exists..... people like Mari.....”

Arisu reaffirmed her target.

“One more thing.”

Arisu pointed the spearhead at Jun.

“Swear right here that you will never do this kind of thing again!”

All expression disappeared from Jun’s face.

“There’s still someone waiting for you..... With just that, won’t you please stop.”

At her words, Jun hung his head down. But, when he raised his face again, there was a warped smile.

“I won’t let anyone stop me!”

Jun’s Mushi stabbed its sharp feet into the side of the building. Clutching onto his Mushi, his figure disappeared down the edge of the rooftop.

“Why.....!”

Biting back the intense emotion that made her want to shout out loud, Arisu choked out a groan.

The sea breeze blew past. Looking over the edge of the rooftop, Arisu could see Jun's figure atop his Mushi at a height that made one felt dizzy.

Arisu had promised Takako that she would to save Jun, how could she possibly let him escape now?

“I won't let you..... Isn't that right, Mari?”

Arisu spoke to her late friend who was a Mushitsuki in her heart. She had already decided what she was going to do.

“This way, I really might just die.....”

Looking down, Arisu tightened her grip around the silver spear.

“I'm going now, Mari.”

With a *'ton'*, Arisu kicked off the rooftop.



—In the next moment, Arisu was buffeted by violent gales of wind along with the sensation of dropping.

Due to the pressure of the wind and fear, she could barely open her eyes.

Her gaze met with that of Jun who looked like he could not believe what he was seeing.

*“Seyaaaa~!”*

The moment Arisu passed Jun, she brandished the spear in a flash.

The windows along the building all shattered as if struck by an explosion.

Blade-like silver scales were released from the spear which bisected Jun’s Mushi diagonally. The excess force of the scales carved a deep gash on the side of the building.

The moment the Mushi was sliced into half, all expression disappeared from Jun’s face. His limbs dangled in the air like that of a doll.

Ta-ka-ko—.

In the end, that name seemed to form from his mouth. With that, his body seemed to freeze, ceasing any movement.

Was that what the boy in the black coat mentioned, turning into a ‘Fallen’? — In some part of her mind, Arisu pondered calmly.

*“Sei~!”*

Turning the spear to its shaft, Arisu smacked Jun’s motionless body. His body was sent flying towards the building, sending him rolling into the building through the broken window.

However, she could not allow herself to meet her end here. Arisu swung the spear around and stabbed it into the side of the building.

—My dream, can I entrust it to you?

She recalled the face of her close friend who wanted to live but could not.

She must not allow herself to die just like that having had Mari's dream entrusted to her.

“Like I'd..... die like this!”

The spear dug into the building, absorbing the momentum of her descent. Her arms which bore her entire weight screamed.

However, a shadow washed over Arisu.

It was the leg of the bisected Mushi.

“.....Ah.....”

The falling body of the Mushi crashed into Arisu, flinging her and the spear away from the building.

Losing the clutch, gravity began pulling Arisu to the ground again.

I'm sorry, Mari—.

With her eyes open, Arisu apologised in her heart.

I couldn't—.

Right when she was about to lose consciousness, she saw the surface of the building explode.

However, unlike previously, the impact came from within the building this time.

A black figure burst out from within the explosion. She seemed to recognise that familiar-looking black coat and over-sized goggles. One of his hands held an automatic handgun.

“You this idiotic girl.....!”

The figure in the coat grabbed onto Arisu, and dexterously pointed his handgun at below.

An unimaginably loud rumble resembling a cannon discharged from the handgun.

The spherical roof of the observation deck in the middle of the ‘ㄣ’ exploded into pieces.

Before she could even raise a scream, Arisu was impacted by a violent collision and a roar that seemed to shatter her eardrum.



## Part 5

*“.....Uuu.....”*

She could hear some groans of pain by her ears.

Before she realised, Arisu no longer felt the impact. She might have even lost her consciousness for a moment.

She gingerly opened her tightly-shut eyes.

This is the observation deck—she determined.

She had crashed through the roof, scattering glass fragments everywhere as well as destroying some lightings and the telescoping apparatus.

That was when Arisu realised that she was being embraced by somebody. She lifted her head.

Her eyes met with that of a boy with a look of extreme displeasure lying atop her.

It seems that he had been injured from protecting Arisu. His coat laid in tatters and the lens of his goggles had cracked.

*“Why did I end up like this..... Damn it.....”*

The pattern running across the boy's face reverted into feelers and withdrew from his body. The feelers all over his body converged, turning into a green Mushi.

As I thought, this guy is a Mushitsuki—.

With this thought, Arisu tried to call out to question him. However, she realised what position they were in.

*“How long are you going to embrace me, get away from me right now!”*

The boy opened his eyes slightly. He languidly spreaded out his limbs, forming

a ‘大’ figure on the ground.

“.....Normally, one would've expected at least a, ‘Thank you’, or a ‘Are you alright?’, but you..... Aah, I shouldn't have bother saving you. Seriously. Geez.”

At that, the boy stopped moving. His wounds seemed to be quite severe, such that he could not even move.

Meanwhile, Arisu could not move as well. Although she had no external injuries due to the boy covering her, her waist was pinned down. Of course, she couldn't tell him that either.



Lying in that position with their bodies overlaid, the two let out a big sigh.

“That’s the same type of Mushi as mine..... but it doesn’t fuse with you, why is that so?”

“That’s because it’s not my Mushi.”

“But, it should be impossible for you to take possession of another's Mushi.”

“That’s because..... the original owner of the Mushi is no longer around.”

“.....Why are you trying to get involved with Mushitsuki?”

“Because I want to know.”

“Know what?”

Biting her lips, Arisu continued.

“I want to know, what exactly are the Mushitsuki..... How do they come about and also..... why is it that they can only end up like that.....”

“.....”

For a while, the two of them remained in silence. As Arisu was right next to the boy’s chest, she could feel his steady heartbeat. She wondered if perhaps her own heartbeat could be felt by the boy.

“Ah-ah.....”

The boy muttered lethargically.

“If only it wasn’t someone with such a child-like body, this wouldn’t be such a lousy situation—”

“*Arisu punch~!*”

“.....!”

Being hit in his wound, the boy could only squirm wordlessly.

## Part 6

A few days later, it was announced that Harimoto Jun had “transfer school”, bringing the case to an end.

While still in the process of cleaning up after the incident, the school operated as per normal.

However, Ichinokuro Arisu was in an unusually good mood this morning.

“Hey, Arisu.”

It was currently the morning short homeroom. Sitting next to her, Saionji Ena poked at Arisu with her elbow.

“Is it that guy?”

“*Oh, yes.*”

“Taking a good look at him now, he seems to be a good person.”

Sitting diagonally behind her, Kujou Takako mentioned to Arisu who was nodding approvingly. —Although she looked gloomy the past few days as expected, Takako started to smile like before again more recently.

Having informed her about what happened to Harimoto Jun afterwards, Takako still smiled towards Arisu.

—Thank you very much. Arisu-san was the one who stopped him, right.

And then, she also said this.

—When he comes back, I will tell him, “welcome back”.

It seems that Takako would wait patiently for Jun to return. Arisu knew that beneath the usually meek and gentle side of her friend, there lies an unimaginable strength of will.

In the end, Jun had clearly called out Takako's name. This too showed that

Takako took up an irreplaceable place in his heart.

“You can't let his appearance deceive you, Takako. Despite what you see, he's actually very ferocious underneath. *Uhuhu*, I wonder how shall I discipline him from now on.”

“Discipline, eh.....”

Arisu and gang chattered as if the boy standing on the podium in front did not existed.

“I am Kusuriya Daisuke. I hope to be able to get along with everybody else from now on.”

Introducing himself as a transfer student, he lowered his head in a bow.

—It seems that the organisation which Daisuke belonged to had deemed Arisu as a target for observation. Ordinarily, someone like that would be immediately sent to some facility somewhere. However, she was the lone daughter of the Ichinokuro family, one of the leaders of the financial world. As a result of various considerations and dealings, it was decided that someone would be sent to stay by her side as her observer.

The chime signalling the end of short homeroom rang.

Before Kusuriya Daisuke even found his desk, Arisu stood on her chair and yelled in a loud voice.

“Attention, everyone. I would like to make an introduction once again. This is Kusuriya Daisuke-kun, the new attendant hired by the Ichinokuro family due to various circumstances. Feel free to order him around as if he was your servant.”

The attention of the whole class was focused onto Arisu and Daisuke.

With a look of anguish, Daisuke briskly walked by Arisu's side and whispered.

“Didn't I say before that the observer and the target must appear unrelated?”

“Ah, my throat is feeling a bit dry.”

Ignoring Daisuke's whisper, Arisu spoke loudly without care.

“You this.....”

“I said, my throat is feeling a bit dry.”



Facing Arisu who was ignoring every single word he says, Daisuke appeared to resign himself in acceptance. With a sigh, he left the classroom.

After a while, Daisuke returned to Arisu's desk, holding a pack of juice in hand.

"I've bought it, my lady."

"Uh, good work—"

However, her hand only grasped thin air.

The cold juice pack was instead pressed against her cheeks.

"*Fufufu*..... What do you think you're doing?"

"Here, drink it."

".....You this....."

Ena grinned to herself as she watched the chaos ensues. On the other hand, Takako had a troubled look on her face as she looked back and forth between the two.

Beyond the window of the classroom wrapped in a threatening silence, a silver Morpho butterfly flapped its wings.

# Episode 02. The Night's Song that Weaves the Dream

Gently, the evening sun rays illuminating the ground slowly retreated.

As if in replacement, the twinkling stars dotting the night sky approached. In fact, it was not as if the distance between the Earth and the stars have changed, but the feeling that it did was all that mattered. At least, that was the charm held by Ichinokuro Arisu's romantic daydreams.

“Woah..... wow, that looks amazing! Look! You can see the sea from here.”

Arisu pointed out excitedly to Saionji Ena who sat diagonally opposite her, and had a look of dread in contrast. Sitting next to her, Kujou Takako had a gentle smile on her face.

“If we continue going higher, do you think we would be able to see our school? I can’t wait!”

The school Takako mentioned, was Horusu Seijou Academy Middle School, of which the three of them were second-year students at.

A colourful circle lit up the summer night.

Standing at over 100 metres, the large ride was revolving slowly.

Arisu and the rest were currently riding in a large Ferris wheel.

“*Kyaah*, did the gondola just sway? That was scary.”

The girls screamed loudly, with Arisu and Ena hugging Takako tightly.

“That’s so unlike you, Arisu. Since when were you the type to scream like a girl.”

Ena knock Arisu’s forehead. It was obvious that Ena was using more strength than required. Seeing the two of them messing around, Takako laughed out

loud.

But then—.

*“.....Haah.....”*

They heard a heavy sigh that could only be described in one word as ‘depressing’.

The temperature in the gondola dropped.

*“.....”*

Still in the position when they were messing around, Arisu and Ena looked at the corner of the seat with grave expressions.

There was a girl seated there. To be more accurate, she was more like leaning against the window glass rather than sitting down. She looked to be of foreign descent; having a well-featured face and a tall body, giving off the feeling of being a westerner.

*“.....Haah.....”*

A white patch of condensation had formed on the panel where the girl had sighed at repeatedly. She raised her slim finger sluggishly and traced it around the patch of condensation.

*“Huhuu.....”*

As if finding something amusing, the girl laughed to herself. On the other hand, Arisu and the other girls’ faces darkened.

*“So high up.....”*

The girl muttered seemingly to herself.

*“How good would it feel..... to just jump out like that.....”*

*“Erm, it can’t be that that person.....”*

Takako tilted her head in a refined manner as she spoke.

*“She’s not thinking of suicide, is she? If she jumps out at this height.....”*

*“.....!”*

Arisu and Ena looked at each other and whispered.

“Wha-wha-what should we do, Arisu! In the first place, this is all your fault! You were the one who said that it’s okay for that unknown person to join us!”

“I-if it comes to that, we’ll just have to stop her!”

“Why, why did it turn out like this?”

Takako said with a sigh.

That was precisely what Arisu wanted to know as well.

## Part 1

The sun began to retreat behind a group of faraway buildings.

Along with the darkening sky, the fluorescent lamps lining the courtyard automatically lighted up.

In the distance, a circular display of light could be seen.

It belonged a large Ferris wheel situated at a plaza near the sea. The Ferris wheel boasted of being the tallest in Japan, and was one of the most popular date spots in Akamaki City.

“Anyway, as I was saying, your Mushi is the first of its type seen.”

At the voice coming from right beside her, Ichinokuro Arisu shifted her sight from the window.

Arisu was walking along the corridor of a general hospital. Passing through the reception and the elevator, she had arrived at the fifth floor.

As it was just before the end of visitation hours, there were not much people around. Visitors were mostly on their way home, and patients also returned to their rooms. Nurses occasionally walked around, tending to their business.

“Heh.”

“Don’t ‘Heh’ me. This is about you, so why don’t you pay more attention.”

Kusuriya Daisuke said in displeasure. He was a boy with no distinct features, one who wouldn’t leave any impression even after having conversed with once.

“It looks like I’ll have to start getting used to explaining things in such a way that even an idiot can understand.”

*“Arisu elbow~!”*

Arisu elbow found its way to Daisuke’s solar plexus, causing him to cower in pain and clutch his stomach.

She continued to walk down the corridor with a look of aloof. Behind, she could hear someone asked, 'What happened to you? Are you alright?', and the reply, 'I-it's nothing'.

After she took a few more steps, Arisu was impacted by a blow to her head. Daisuke had hit her.

"How dare a freeloader raise his hands against his master, are you asking to be disciplined?"

"Who are you referring to as my master. I feel the same; if I could, I'd want to stop babysitting you as soon as possible."

*"Arisu double punch~!"*

Arisu ended the confrontation by driving both her fists into Daisuke's stomach. Leaving him behind crouched on the floor, she briskly walked down the corridor.

Arisu had just met Kusuriya Daisuke a few days ago, their meeting triggered by a certain incident.

A certain entity was deeply involved with the incident, one that was the prime subject of rumours.

The *Mushi*.

Referring to monsters that infest humans and feed on their dreams. They were named Mushi due to their external appearance resembling those of insects<sup>[2]</sup>. Having surpassed the level of rumours by now, Mushi and the people who were infested by them, known as *Mushitsuki*, strike fear in the hearts of people.

However, Arisu knows the reality.

The fact that Mushi really exists.

Even as their aspirations and ideals are being consumed day by day, Mushitsuki strive to live on. They march forwards, bearing the fear of dying from having their dream being completely consumed by their Mushi someday.

Arisu did not know anything about Kusuriya Daisuke. She only knew that he belonged to a secret government organisation that captures and isolates



Mushitsuki known as the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau.

Due to the incident in which Arisu was involved a few days ago, she was suspected of being a Mushitsuki and thus, she was to be placed under “observation” by Daisuke. As a result of negotiations with the Ichinokuro family, it was decided that Daisuke would stay in the Ichinokuro house.

“.....”

Arisu came to a stop in front of a certain room. The blank nameplate outside of the room signified that the room was currently unoccupied.

The door was opened abruptly.

It had been opened by Daisuke from the side, with no consideration for Arisu who stood motionlessly, as if she being in the way.

“Get in quickly. A nurse will spot us.”

Even under Arisu’s glare, Daisuke remained cool. Although he usually hides under the guise of a normal middle school student, once in a while, he reveals a terribly icy look. She was curious as to what kind of life he had led, but the chance of him revealing it himself was as good as none.

“Get out of the way.”

Pushing Daisuke aside, Arisu entered the room.

There was a prior guest already in the hospital room. Within the darkness, a silver light danced.

It was a single Morpho butterfly, however, it was not a normal butterfly. It had four antennas and its body was clad in brilliant scales that seemed to emanate light.

It was the Mushi which followed Arisu. At the same time, it was the Mushi whose original host was Arisu’s close friend who breathed her last in this room one year ago.

The butterfly landed on the windowsill and closed its wings.

“So, this is the room that Hanashiro Mari was in.”

The sound of the door closing came from behind her.

Like the majority of Horusu Seijou Academy's students, Mari hailed from an affluent family. As such, this private room differed from other six-person rooms; even the bed was a luxury item made of woodgrain. In addition to a large television, a fridge, and a nurse call line, there was even a painting hung above the bed. However, under the receding evening sun rays, everything appeared faded and only a cold stillness hung in the room.

—Ichinokuro..... Arisu?

Arisu could almost see Mari tilting her head in puzzlement on the bed.

—I'm sorry. I don't even know the names and looks of my classmates.....

During Arisu's initial visit, Mari had not even known who she was.

That was only to be expected, as even for Arisu, that was the first time she had seen Mari. Since her admission to the school, Mari had not attended even a single day.

"The Mushi that was supposed be Hanashiro Mari's."

Daisuke said as he leaned against the wall with his arms folded.

"It should have disappeared the moment its host died. Yet, why did that Mushi infest an unrelated person like you..... No matter whatever it is, just tell me anything you remember that could be a clue."

Looking at the side, Arisu realised that the bookshelf which was there previously was gone. It had been brought in for Mari who loved books.

"....."

Arisu did not know anything. Even the fact that Mari had been a Mushitsuki.

Silence filled the darkening hospital room.

After a while, she realised that Daisuke was silent.

Lifting her face and turning back, she found him with his arms crossed and head facing downwards. His eyes were closed.

"Hey."

At Arisu's low voice, Daisuke raised his head. It seems that he had dozed off.

“Just like the previous case with Harimoto-kun, it’s not like you care about what happened to Mari, right.”

Arisu spoke the words that just came into her mind. Harimoto referred to the Mushitsuki responsible for the previous incident who had already been brought in by the organisation Daisuke belonged to.

“.....”

Daisuke let out a big sigh. Seeing his calm countenance touched Arisu’s raw nerves. But when she wanted to snap back, she realised that he looked terrible.

“Are you feeling bad somewhere? It seems to me that you look somewhat tired.”

He looked surprised for a moment, but immediately reverted to his original expression and got up from the wall.

“If you can’t think of any clues, then let’s go already. Someone will see us.”

“What’s with that, jeez.”

It was just as she stood up, her cheeks puffed up.

—Isn’t it beautiful, that Ferris wheel—.

She heard Mari’s voice.

Hit by a wave of dizziness, Arisu turned around.

She looked beyond the Morpho butterfly shimmering with a silver sheen. Outside the window, a colourful and dazzling Ferris wheel could be seen.

“The Ferris wheel.....”

Memories flowed out from the recesses of her mind.

Looking at the Ferris wheel out of this exact window together with Mari, they had made a promise to ride it together someday. Though, which one of them had been the one to suggest that they do so—.

“What’s the matter? Did you remember something?”

“Eh.....?”

Called out to by Daisuke, Arisu snapped back to reality.

Just now, something important crossed her mind for an instant. However, she could not remember what was it about despite how hard she racked her brain.

She gazed out of the window. Over there, a circular display of light shined vividly in the darkness of the night.

## Part 2

The Akamaki City municipal park had high pedestrian traffic even during nighttime.

Along the wide walkway, a variety of stalls could be seen. As the summer festival was approaching, there were also paper lanterns placed along the path. Amplifiers have also been installed every 100 metres along the path in preparation for live performances.

Still in their uniform, Arisu and gang were walking around the park.

“Is it okay for you to hang out so late? Won’t your parents scold you?”

From the back of the three girls, Daisuke’s sigh could be heard. His tone of voice was mild, unlike before at the hospital. In front of the other two, he presented a ‘normal middle school student’ version of himself.

“No problem~. I’ve already informed them with a call, so no need to worry about them being angry.”

The one who replied casually was Arisu. To her right, Saionji Ena nodded.

“Yup, yup. Anyways, for my family, unlike my sisters, I’ve always been treated with the attitude of *laissez-faire*.”

“That’s a problem in of itself.....”

“If I am together with Arisu-san and Ena-san, my parents would not be that worried.”

The one grinning with a friendly smile was Kujou Takako.

After joining Ena and Takako at the hospital’s waiting area, the three of them decided to head here. At Arisu’s suggestion to ride the Ferris wheel, apart from Daisuke, the other two girls agreed readily.

“Is that so.”

Daisuke sighed again, not bothering to hide the look of annoyance on his face. With his mission to monitoring Arisu, he probably had to stay by her side at all times.

“Despite what Kusuriya-kun is saying.....”

Ena approached Daisuke who was walking a few steps behind.

“In fact, you’re overjoyed, aren’t you? Being able to go on a date with three beautiful ladies. Don’t be shy.”

“Wai-..... Saionji-san!”

“Come here too, Takako. Don’t let Kusuriya-kun escape!”

“Me? Erm, like this?”

Imitating Ena, Takako linked her arm with Daisuke’s.

“You’re so bashful, that’s so cute! Hey Arisu, how ’bout you let Kusuriya-kun to me!”

“Ari..... Ichinokuro-san!”

Arisu looked frostily at Daisuke who was held on both arms by Ena and Takako.

“.....What, you want me to join in too? Stop being so sleazy!”



“I’m asking you to help me stop them though!”

After walking for a few more minutes, Arisu and gang arrived at their destination.

In the large plaza, the extensive queues stretched so long that it resembled a snake choking its prey. At its front was the towering Ferris wheel.

With a diameter of 120 metres, the Ferris wheel was 130 metres at its highest.

When Arisu saw it from the hospital, the Ferris wheel was divided into six portions each lit with a different colour. However, it was completely blue right now, imparting a bluish glow onto the night sky.

“*Uwah*. So this is what a Ferris wheel feels like!”

“We are going to ride this, right. I cannot wait to try it!”

“Come on, stop sulking, Daisuke. Hurry up and join the queue.”

When Arisu called out to Daisuke, he looked back indignantly. It seems that he was still upset over being teased by Ena and the rest just now. Arisu thought about how he was weirdly childish in some respects.

Suddenly, Daisuke’s mobile phone rang and he picked up the call. As he spoke on the phone, his expression turned grave.

“What’s the matter?”

“Sorry, something came up. I need to return immediately, the three of you have fun.”

Saying so with a fake smile on his face, Daisuke promptly left.

“Eh? Kusuriya-kun isn’t riding the Ferris wheel?”

“What a pity.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter even if a guy like that is gone anyway. Let’s hurry up and join the queue.”

The three of them joined the snaking queue.

After waiting for around one hour, they could finally see the end of the



queue. Daisuke had not contact them back at all, it seems like he has no intention of riding the Ferris wheel.

“My apologies, but, as there are only four seats.....”

“What a bind, we’re in excess of one person.”

Discussions of what to do with the person left out could be heard from the attendant and the group in front. It was a group of five people of both genders.

“Sorry, Neiko. Is it okay if the four of us board first?”

“Eh.....?”

They looked like they were from a band. The youth with a guitar case hanging off his back requested of the tall girl.

Arisu knotted her eyebrows with a *muu*. Even though they were supposed to be one group, no one seemed to have any disapproval. Without protest from the girl, it seems to be decided. Leaving her by herself, the other four people got on the gondola.

The attendant approach Arisu’s group.

“Dear customer, there are only three of you, right? My apologies but..... would you mind if the person before joined the three of you? As you can see, there’s still a long crowd behind.....”

“Eeh?”

Ena raised a voice of dissatisfaction.

Arisu looked at the girl left behind, she seemed two or three years older than herself. She wore a shirt with a logo covered by a jacket on her tall model-like body. Her beautiful side profile was looking up at the Ferris wheel.

“We don’t mind.”

Arisu agreed while glaring at the previous gondola. The attendant seemed to sigh in relief while saying, ‘I apologise for your inconvenience’, as he returned to the gate.

“Why did you give him the OK, we don’t even know that girl..... It would have been so fun with just the three of us.”

“What’s wrong with that. Wouldn’t you be lonely if you had to ride alone too.”

“Huh? In the first place, Arisu..... what are you so angry about?”

“Well, I don’t mind it at all.”

As they were speaking, it came to their turn.

The next gondola descended and the previous occupants alighted. The attendant guided the tall girl called Neiko and Arisu’s group onto the gondola.

Having entered the round gondola, the attendant closed the door. The gondola ascended shakily with a *gotan*, signalling that they had started moving.

The interior of the gondola had seats for two on both sides, for a total of four seats. Arisu sat next to Takako, while Ena and Neiko sat opposite.

“We’re moving, we’re going up, Arisu, Takako!”

“It feels kind of heart-pounding, doesn’t it.”

Ena and Takako looked out of the window in the direction of the sea in awe.

On the other hand, Arisu stared at the opposite side where the city was at. She could not see the hospital where they had come from yet.

“Aah, a bit more and we can see the sea. Come and see, Arisu!”

“It’s not like we know which direction the sea is at anyway, haha.”

The three girls were currently in high spirits, but.

“.....*Haah*.....”

Depressing.

A sigh as heavy as lead could be heard.

Still in the position with their bodies leaned forward, the three girls’ faces harden.

“.....It feels like..... I’m kind of tired.....”

For a moment, they thought that an invisible ghost had spoken. As she did not have much of a presence, Arisu and the rest had almost forgotten about the other person.

In the corner of the gondola—which for some reason had its fluorescent light flickering—the girl who was reclining heavily on the seat muttered.

“.....I just want to be at ease.....”

It was the tall girl. Knowing nothing about her save her name Neiko, her forehead was pressed against the window, with her lifeless eyes just gazing down at the night scenery.

“.....*Haah*.....”

The temperature in the gondola plummeted.

“.....”

Arisu and Ena wordlessly pulled themselves from the window.

“U-until we see the sea, I think I’ll just take a seat. It seems dangerous..... to stick so close to the window.”

“That’s right. *Aha,ahaha*, do tell me when you see the sea, Ena.”

“What’s wrong, Arisu-san? Ena-san too.”

Unable to stand the heavy atmosphere, Arisu and Ena forced a smile. Takako was the only one who was oblivious to the situation and looked at the two strangely.

Neiko was as expressionless as a doll. But, she was exuding a gloomy, a sort of ‘problematic’ aura.

All of a sudden, Ena’s eyes lighted up and she raised her body.

“Ah! Isn’t that the lighthouse—”

“.....*Haah*.....”

“I guess it’s nothing after all..... even a lighthouse.....”

Lowering her hand that was pointing at the lighthouse, Ena sluggishly returned to her former position. Only Takako, who remain unmoved in a certain sense, happily replied, ‘You’re right, I can see it’.

“.....*Haah*.....”

As silence returned to the gondola, only Neiko’s gloomy sighs could be heard.

## Part 3

“She’s not thinking of suicide, is she.....?”

“If it comes to that, we’ll just have to stop her.....!”

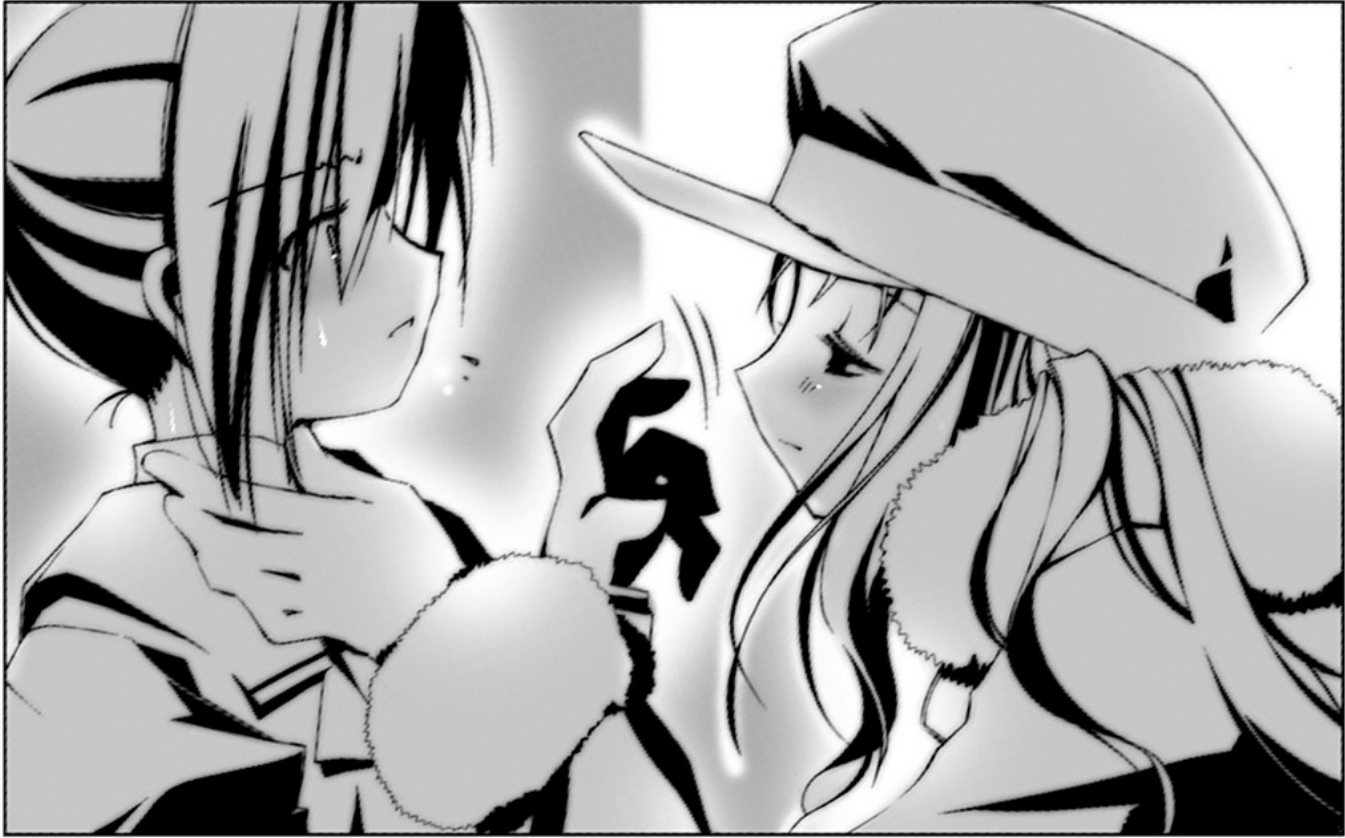
The three girls had put their heads together and whispered. Immediately afterwards, Ena was shocked by what she saw behind Arisu.

“A-Arisu!”

“Eh?”

Turning around, Arisu could feel something cold wrapping around her neck. She felt goosebumps rising all over her skin as she was pressed by something as cold as ice.

Neiko was touching Arisu’s neck with both of her hands. Their faces were so close to each other that they were almost touching.



“Wha-.....?”

“Voice.....”

“Eh?”

“Try saying something.....”

In close proximity, Neiko’s lips moved. From that distance, Arisu could see that she had applied pink lipstick. She could also see the colour of her iris, which was closer to tawny than black.

“What is it.....?”

Her body stiffened, she replied awkwardly. At this, Neiko smiled softly and released her hands from Arisu’s neck.

“As I thought..... you have a good voice.....”

Murmuring to herself with a satisfied look, she lowered her waist onto the seat.

“A-are you alright, Arisu?”

“Where’s the help..... I-I was almost killed.....!”

“How do I put it..... what a strange person.”

“.....*Haah*.....”

At her sigh, the heavy atmosphere returned.

S-so she’s like that—.

As Arisu’s face cramped up, she came to a conclusion. She felt bad for Neiko, but she felt like she could understand a bit about why the rest of her group decided to leave her behind.

Their gondola has reached around the midpoint of Ferris wheel. At this height, the view of the whole city could be seen. The neon lights on the ground flickered like stars.

At that moment.

“*Kyaa!*”

Arisu, Ena and Takako’s screams overlapped.

All of a sudden, the gondola was hit by a tremor, causing it to shake violently.

“W-what happened?”

Ena and Takako clung onto the walls while Arisu immediately took a look at the steel pillars supporting the Ferris wheel. The illuminations along the Ferris wheel broke, causing the lights to flicker. Even as the Ferris wheel shook, it continued to rotate, bringing their gondola higher up in the air.

Outside of the window, a silver light was dancing about.

It was the Morpho butterfly. As if trying to warn Arisu about something, it flew around in the shape of the number 8.

“Mari.....?”

Arisu creased her eyebrows.

The tremors ceased after a while, but the flickering lights did not. The light bulbs along the Ferris wheel spewed out some sparks before dying out. Takako, grasping Ena’s hand tightly, looked at the surrounding anxiously.

“W-what was that just now.....?”

In the silent gondola, the sigh sounded especially loud.

“.....*Haah*.....”

Arisu looked at Neiko who was sitting next to the window. Ena and Takako were shivering in fear.

Neiko was still in her own world, looking down at the cityscape without a care in the world. Her fair expression seemed to be filled with a different abnormality to it than before.

Another slight tremor struck the gondola. The sound of metal clashing against metal was transmitted throughout the Ferris wheel.

“W-why is she so calm.....”

Ena questioned unnervingly.

Neiko’s lips moved.

—*Ding Dong~*, *Ding Dong~*, the chime ringing across the sea, deliver us to his

land.....—.

“!”

Arisu saw what happened in that instance.

A fog-like substance emanated from Neiko who was leaning against the wall. The thing that emerged from the fog before fading into particles of light had the visage of a long-horned grasshopper spreading out its wings. Arisu could even see its six compound eyes melting into the air.

—Gospel of light, child of resurrection, invite us with the chime of your bell, *Ding Dong~*, *Ding Dong~*.....— Neiko’s lips opened. However, the song seemed to echo in the surrounding air itself, overlapping with the ‘*Diiing*’ sound of a bell.

The shaking of the Ferris wheel intensified. Ena and Takako were speechless upon witnessing the scene before them.

The Morpho butterfly outside the window flurriedly fluttered its wings.

“Don’t tell me you’re a.....”

Arisu stared at Neiko.

“Mushitsuki.....?”

—Neiko’s lips twisted into a smile.

“.....Mushitsuki.....?”

Ena shouted in disbelief. Surprisingly, the one to calm her down was Takako. She held Ena while telling her, ‘It’s going to be alright. Calm down’. This made Ena regain her calm and held Takako back.

The Mushitsuki that Arisu and Daisuke encountered in the previous incident was Takako’s childhood friend, thus, this was not the first time she saw a Mushitsuki. In addition, it was fortunate that Takako had been strong mentally in the first place, allowing her to soothe Ena down.

The more intense the tremors, the louder Neiko sang.

“Stop that!”

Arisu pulled on Neiko’s shirt, making her stop singing. At the same time, the



tremors assaulting the Ferris wheel weakened.

Neiko raised her head languidly. Seeing her lifeless gaze, Arisu felt shivers on her back.

“I’m glad..... to be able to see this city..... from the highest point at the very end.....”

Although her singing voice had stopped, the sound that seemed to vibrate along with the air itself persisted.

“This sound is your doing, right! What were you intending to do to this Ferris wheel? What were you doing?”

The Ferris wheel shook.

Neiko smiled and opened her mouth.

The sound of bell chime became louder. It was as if Neiko shook the surrounding air along with her windpipe.

Arisu recalled Daisuke’s explanation while they were at the hospital.

Mushitsuki were broadly separated into three types. One is the Minion type where the Mushi exist with a physical body and obeys the host. Another is the Fusion type in which the Mushi assimilates with the host’s body, giving them supernatural physical abilities. Lastly is the Special type which does not have a physical body, instead giving its host the ability to manipulate various power at will. In exchange for using these powers, the host’s own dream would be consumed by the Mushi. From what Arisu saw, Neiko’s Mushi belonged to the Special type.

“I told you to stop, didn’t I!”

The quaking subsided along with the volume of the sound of the bell.

“Look.....”

From the position where Arisu held her down, Neiko looked out of the window.

Not letting her guard down, Arisu looked out of the window. What she saw caused her to involuntarily swallow her breath. Ena and Takako too, temporarily

forgot about their current situation upon seeing the view.

The gondola which Arisu and the rest were in was currently at the apex of the Ferris wheel.

The ground was overlaid with a starry sky.

Countless shiny grains lay scattered across a vast black sheet. What differed from the actual starry skies was that each grain wriggled around like water droplets on a screen. The movements of the multicoloured grains served to show that they were alive.

“Over there.....”

Neiko’s fingertip hit the window with a *kotsun*.

“I grew up over there in the suburbs. It’s an old town where telephone poles are still wooden. It's practically filled with the elderly so much so that people around my age could easily be counted with fingers.....”

The three girls were all looking at Neiko.

“Over there.....”

Next, Neiko pointed to the region which where railway tracks and the national highway ran concurrently. The station which Arisu frequented was located there as well.

“While we were still in middle school and couldn’t leave the suburbs, that was where we first performed before a crowd..... At first, no one stopped to listen. But recently, several people would stop to listen to my songs.....”

Neiko’s voice tailed off. Subsequently, the ringing of the bell which resonated with the tremors veered into noise. The Ferris wheel shook again.

Having passed the top, the gondola began its descend.

“‘Aah, the world is such a wide place’, I thought.....”

Taking a breath, Neiko started recounting again.

“I want to go to a bigger, wider venue..... With that notion, I heard the sound of the bell chime..... And then, I became a Mushitsuki.....”

Arisu could feel her sigh on her cheek. A look of deep fatigue emerged in

Neiko's expression.

Looking at her complexion, Arisu had an unpleasant premonition.

"Don't tell me, the Mushi devoured your dreams.....?"

It was rumoured that Mushitsuki whose dream were completely consumed by their Mushi would meet death. In fact, Arisu had already heard that it was true from Daisuke.

"H-hey, that is.....!"

Ena, which was clenched on to the window, pointed outside. Far beneath their gondola, the largest supporting pillar of the Ferris wheel looked as if it was being carved down by something invisible. Overlapped with the support pillar, the shimmering silhouette of a long-horned grasshopper could be seen.

"Nonetheless, there is no return for us anymore....."

Neiko smiled, prompting Arisu to ask.

".....What do you mean?"

"There's nowhere else we can escape, we've been chased to a dead end..... By the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau....."

Arisu widened her eyes. The Special Environmental Preservation Bureau was the organisation that Daisuke belonged to.

"The Special Environmental Preservation Bureau..... Mushitsuki captured by the SEPB will have their Mushi killed with no exceptions..... And once they turn into a Fallen, they would never be able to dream a second time again. To be unable to sing..... If you take my songs away from me, then there's no reason to live for....."

"That's why, you wanted to bring us down along with you?"

At Takako's words, Ena whimpered a sob.

Arisu immediately looked towards the Morpho butterfly outside of the window. —However, she did not have anything at hand that the Morpho butterfly can assimilate with. Furthermore, she did not know how she could deal with Neiko's Mushi which does not even have a physical form.

If only they could reach the ground, then something could be done. If the SEPB was coming, Daisuke should have known about this situation as well.

“Just now, you said ‘at the very end’, right. How did you know that you have been discovered?”

To buy some time, Arisu questioned Neiko. The girl smiled back.

“You know the people on board the gondola in front of us? I heard them talk to the SEPB..... It seems that they made a deal with them to lead me here, and in exchange spare them..... We were supposed to be in the middle of our escape, and yet they suggested to come here.....”

Arisu was lost for words. The attitude they adopted before boarding the gondola, it was all to leave Neiko by herself—.

Forgetting their current situation, Arisu raised her voice.

“They betrayed you? Aren’t they your friends?”

But Neiko only smiled wordlessly. Arisu could feel her anger boiling over.

“Then, why didn’t you escape! Didn’t you already realised that it was a trap? Why..... why are you still smiling even though your friends betrayed you!”

“Have you ever placed your trust in somebody.....?”

Neiko stared back at Arisu. Her expression held no anger nor hatred at anyone. The only emotion she could see was deep sadness—.

“‘I was betrayed’. Have you ever felt that before?”

Arisu couldn’t make a word.

Hanashiro Mari—.

Arisu had thought of Mari as a close friend. Even more so than her friends in school, Arisu could talk to Mari about anything.

A student from the same grade who had never attended school ever since enrolling. That was Mari. In the eyes of Arisu who lived a normal school life coming to school and making friends, the seat that was always empty frequently came into her sights.

—I’m sorry. I don’t even know the names and looks of my classmates.....

The opening sentence between Arisu, who had visited suddenly on a certain day, and Mari was a self-introduction.

From then on, Arisu visited Mari in the hospital nearly every day. She remembered having lots of fun chatting with Mari, but could not remember what they talked about. Arisu would share with Mari just about anything, and Mari would just happily listen to her.

But, she was mistaken.

One day, Mari just disappeared suddenly; leaving behind the Morpho butterfly which made Arisu realise that she was a Mushitsuki.

“If you realised you were betrayed, what would you do.....?”

Neiko looked at Arisu, then at Ena and Takako.

“How about you? Would you be angry? Perhaps, you would cry? You might just fall into despair, becoming unable to do anything anymore..... The stronger you believed in them, the more helpless you feel when you are betrayed.”

The sound of metal creaking reverberated. The quavering of the Ferris wheel intensified. Seeing Arisu and rest gulping, Neiko smiled uncannily.

“And so..... what do you think I did?”

“Please, just stop.....!”

Unable to stand the situation anymore, Ena shouted.

Immediately afterwards, Arisu widened her eyes.

“Wha—”

Outside the window, countless strange looking monsters closed in to the gondola from the sky.

Some were flapping what seemed like wings, while others floated even without anything resembling a flying apparatus. What they had in common was the appearance of insects with a malicious look.

The monsters started to attack the gondola that Arisu and the rest were in.

“Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Ena hugged onto Takako while screaming.

Several of the Mushi started ramming themselves into the gondola simultaneously.



“.....!”

The gondola jerked more violently unlike any they had experienced before. The window glass cracked and the door bursted in, crushing Arisu and the rest—was not what happened.

At first, Arisu doubted her eyes. It wasn't just her, even the hugging Takako and Ena stared at the sight irregardless of the situation they were in.

The destruction of the gondola they were in had stopped all of a sudden.

—*Ding Dong~*, *Ding Dong~*, eternal wind, oh, behold the sunrise—.

They could hear a song.

The broken glass and bent wall reverted back to their former condition as if somebody had turned back time. The gondola was wrapped in a pale light that restore the gondola to its original state.

“Eh.....?”

Arisu muttered unconsciously.

“Someone is protecting us.....?”

The Mushi floating in the air seemed to be caught in surprise as well. They hovered about in confusion before suddenly recalling their mission and restarted their assault on the gondola again.

“*Nooo!*”

The gondola juddered furiously again. However, the same phenomenon repeated itself. A pale light covered the gondola and repaired the damage done to it.

“We’ve misunderstood—”

Looking down at the support pillar, Arisu finally understood what was happening.

There, she saw large and sharp claws. The claws which seemed to sprout out of thin air were heatedly attacking the support pillar. In opposition, the shimmering silhouette of the long-horned grasshopper surrounded the support pillar, fending off their attacks. As the chime of the bell rang, the fissures in the



pillar closed back.

“Were you the one protecting us all along.....?”

“I’m sorry for involving you guys into this mess.....”

Neiko’s face twisted in pain. She was likely suffering from overusing her power.

“At the very least, I’ll make sure to get you guys.....”

In the midst of her words, her consciousness seemed to cut off for a bit. But, it was only for a moment. Clenching her teeth, she regained her consciousness.

“To the ground..... no matter what.....”

“.....!”

Arisu clenched her fist tightly.

—It feels like..... I’m kind of tired.....

Neiko had already been exhausted from since she boarded the Ferris wheel. She must have been desperately escaping up till now. Even so, she mustered the last of her strength to ensure that Arisu and the rest did not come to harm. Doing so knowingly that her dream would be consumed from using the power of her Mushi—and that that would lead to the end of her life.

“.....That means the one attacking us was the SEPB from the very beginning, right.”

Takako, who was being hugged by Ena, said.

“Even though that would incur so many casualties as well.....”

“Those people are..... that merciless.....”

“Why..... why are they targeting someone like you?”

Arisu did not think that Neiko was a criminal. Despite being hunted down and betrayed by her own friends, she had used her power to protect Arisu and the rest.

“I guess it’s because I’m a Mushitsuki.....”

“Just because.....!”

“You must have met other Mushitsuki before, right..... Amongst them, aren’t there some who used their power nefariously?”

Arisu could not answer Neiko.

Harimoto Jun. The impetus which led to her meeting Daisuke; he was the first Mushitsuki Arisu met apart from Mari. He had used the power of his Mushi to hurt other people.

“We, just by being Mushitsuki, are a dangerous existence..... For us, no matter what happens, our hearts would not change, that’s why.....”

“.....There’s no way I can accept that just because of this reasoning! I’ll bring a stop to this immediately!”

Arisu took out her mobile phone and called Daisuke. He should be somewhere on the ground. Alas, he did not pick up his phone.

“Indeed, there are surely those understand that in the SEPB..... there’s no doubts that they are suffering.”

Arisu could not believe what Neiko was saying. She was implying that the ones attacking them right now were suffering.

“How could you possibly know that? You’ve never even met them before! It’s not like those people even care about others—”

“I know. After all, I’m also a Mushitsuki.....”

Neiko said so with a sigh.

“There are no Mushitsuki who are not fighting their own battles.....”

At that, Arisu recalled.

The look of weariness on the face of Daisuke at the hospital. He usually wore a look of calmness, but she saw him revealed a look of anguish for an instant. Was he also fighting a battle of his own?

“Mushitsuki..... Just what are they.....!”

Closing her mobile phone, Arisu yelled out loud as if squeezing all the air from her lungs.

“I don’t get it! I just don’t understand what any of the Mushitsuki are

thinking!”

The gondola that Arisu and the rest were in was about to reach the ground. However, the intensity of the tremors was reaching its peak. In addition, the pale light surrounding the gondola was gradually thinning.

“Sor-..... ry..... I can’t..... hold on anyone.....”

Neiko’s eyes were growing listless. The glass windows finally broke, scattering inside the gondola.

“Something..... there must be something we can do.....!”

Glaring at the Mushi slamming their body against the gondola, Arisu grinded her teeth. If only there was a suitable object that the Morpho butterfly could fuse with, then she would be able to counterattack. Regrettably, it was not like a pole would just fall from the skies.

The gondola was about to touch ground in just a moment. But at this rate, the Ferris wheel would collapse before they can even escape the gondola.

At this time.

The attack by SEPB stopped. The Mushi attacking the gondola has been struck by some attack and had fallen to the ground.

What had appeared out of the blue and assaulted the Mushi were as expected, other Mushi as well.

“It can’t be.....”

There were four counterattacking Mushi in total. —The same number as Neiko’s friends.

“Did they not betray her?”

Neiko closed her eyes. Her lips formed into a broad smile.

—What do you think I did?

Arisu thought back on what Neiko said earlier and bit her lips.

“Even if you were betrayed..... your feelings wouldn’t change.....?”

Neiko smiled gently.

Even if she was betrayed, her feelings would not change. She would not be angry nor would she hate them.

—For us, no matter what happens, our hearts would not change, that's why.....

She shouldn't have known that they did not really betrayed her. She ought to have felt forsaken, yet even so, Neiko still—.

“You still believed.....!”

“I'm glad..... to have seen such a beautiful view..... in the end.....”

Neiko sunk into her seat. Her eyes, which were reflecting the night scenery, rapidly turned dull.



The four Mushi used the element of surprise to defeat the SEPB's Mushi one by one. Ena lifted her face.

“We’re.....saved.....?”

The gondola was just metres off the ground.

“.....!”

Amidst the strong jolting, Arisu saw a Mushi fly past outside the window.

It was an insect with an unusually long antenna and green wings.

This Mushi belongs to—.

The figure of the green cleridae disappeared.

“Don’t say something like, ‘in the end’, so readily.....!”

A thunderous rumble roared.

It sounded like as if somebody fired off a cannon. The four Mushi whose wings were punctured fell to the ground.

“Every-..... one.....!”

Neiko opened her eyes.

“If you say that all Mushitsuki fight till the very end, then show me that you are going to fight till the very end!”

Arisu evoked the memory of Mari’s smile.

Her close friend could not even struggle.

—No, that may have been wrong. She might have just gave up struggling and left the world for all she know.

Arisu would never be able to find out the truth now. So, there was only one thing she could do.

That was to believe.

Just as Neiko did when she thought she had been betrayed.

Thus, there was no way Arisu would let Neiko who have taught her that lesson give up here.

The gondola finally touched ground.

Immediately, the door was forcefully wrenched open from the outside.

—What it revealed was the Devil shrouded in black.

## Part 4

There stood a figure covered in a jet-black coat and a huge goggle masking half of his face, his hair standing on end. One of his hand held a large automatic handgun which had fused with 'something' glowering with red eyes.

From the handgun, numerous feeler-like appendages stretched out. They instantaneously wrapped around devil's body, forming a green pattern that extended up to his cheek.

"Neiko!"

The four injured Mushi positioned themselves between the demon and the gondola.

The black devil pointed his handgun at the Mushi.

"St-..... op—"

Neiko's face twisted as she reached her hands out.

"Stop it!"

Arisu shouted.

The Morpho butterfly entered the gondola through the open door.

It landed on the handlebar Arisu held, its body releasing silver-coloured feelers which fused with the bar instantly.

It spreaded open its four wings, giving off silver light. One pair merged into a blade, while the another vented silver scales.

Fire spew from the handgun held by the person in the jet-black coat.

".....!"

Arisu jumped in front of the Mushi, barely cutting off the bullet with her spear.



The shockwave rocked the gondola.

Somebody's scream could be heard. But, that was immediately drown out by the sound of the shockwave. The opened door was blasted away, leaving only the seats in a miserable condition.

*"Tch.....!"*

Clicking his tongue, the devil in black—Daisuke, re-trained his handgun at the Mushi.

*"Stop it!"*

Yelling angrily, Arisu swung down the spear from above.

*"Kh.....!"*

Daisuke scarcely managed to block the shaft of the spear with the grip of the handgun.

Spinning the spear around, Arisu swung the spear again at Daisuke's feet. An explosion of silver scales blasted into the surroundings. Bits of asphalt were sent scattering in all directions and a deep gash was carved into the ground.

When the explosion died down, the surroundings became still.

The plaza was completely deserted. In the time it took for the Ferris wheel to make one revolution, all the members of the public had already evacuated.

As if replacing them, Arisu and the rest were surrounded by people with the same appearance as Daisuke. They were probably from the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau as well.

*"Neiko!"*

Four people ran towards the partially destroyed gondola. They all looked to be about Neiko's age. In the lead was a young man with blond hair, followed by a bespectacled lad, then a youth with a muscular body, and finally a girl with a short hairstyle. They surrounded Neiko as if trying to cover her.

*"Every-..... one....."*

Neiko raised her head to look at her friends with her clouded eyes. Opposite her, Ena and Takako had already fainted. They seem to have just collapsed from

the ordeal they just faced instead of any external injuries.

“Sorry..... it should have gone more smoothly.....! If only that monster wasn’t here.....!”

“Pretending to sell out Yomori Neiko then setting up a surprise attack from behind..... Was that your intention to set a trap for us since the beginning?”

Glaring back at Arisu, Daisuke spoke, his voice much colder than usual. His current appearance as that of a member of the SEPB was his genuine character.

Neiko’s friends faced Daisuke with their Mushi.

“Escape from here, Neiko! We’ll deal with these people somehow! At the very least, we’ll take them down with us.....!”

“Neiko, at least you alone.....!”

Her friends who were acting as her shield looked at Neiko in anguish.

“Do you think that you can escape?”

However, Arisu thrust the spear at Daisuke who pointed his gun at them.

“.....What do you think you are doing.”

“Why are you targeting them?”

“That’s because they are Mushitsuki. Either way, I don’t have the intention of letting a single one of them escape. I will kill all of their Mushi and take them away as Fallen.”

“Do you think I will let you do that.”



“Why are you covering for those people?”

Arisu scowled at Daisuke.

“‘Because they are Mushitsuki’.....?”

Arisu turned away from Daisuke and looked at Neiko. Neiko raised her pale face to look back at her.

“Fighting and giving up just because of that..... All that is just an excuse to me. I can’t accept that.”

“You say that because you’re not a Mushitsuki.”

Saying so, Daisuke raised his other hand not holding the handgun. The people in black coat behind him entered a fighting posture. In response, Neiko’s friends also readied themselves to fight.

Arisu too, exerted strength into her hands holding the spear. She had already hardened her resolve to fight.

Right before Daisuke swung his hand.

“.....To fight.....”

Neiko’s voice disrupted the silence.

“Indeed..... Isn’t it possible for us to continue to fight.....?”

Her eyes were focused on Arisu.

“No matter how hard it gets..... even if our freedom is taken away..... As long as we are alive, surely someday we can sing again..... Isn’t that right..... Even if we have to literally sell our souls to the devil, as long as we can live.....”

Everybody’s gaze gathered onto Neiko.

Even in the tense atmosphere that seemed like it would shatter any moment, Neiko sighed deeply. Although she had sighed repeatedly in the gondola previously, Arisu could feel that this one felt different.

Neiko's expression as she looked at Daisuke was one filled with determination.

“Hey, you..... is there really no other alternatives apart from turning us into

Fallen? Or could we..... yes, perhaps, be like you guys—”

## Part 5

—The ground was overlaid with a starry sky.

Countless shiny grains lay scattered across a vast black sheet. What differed from the actual starry skies was that each grain wriggled around like water droplets on a screen. The movements of the multicoloured grains served to show that they were alive.

She had just seen the same sight a few moments ago. But somehow, she felt detached from the beautiful night scene.

Perhaps the reason why it looked so beautiful then was because she was with Neiko just now. It was because of how much she loved the cityscape that Arisu and the rest also saw the cityscape through her eyes.

Arisu and Daisuke were currently in an ascending gondola.

“What’s going to happen to Neiko-san and the rest from now on?”

“*Nene.*”

“.....?”

“She have already received a codename. A Mushitsuki belonging to the Special type, especially one with a restoration ability such as hers is extremely valuable. The higher-ups are probably satisfied with her. The other four..... normally, with that level of strength, would have been turned into Fallen. But, they were probably inducted as a means to tie down *Nene* to the SEPB. At best, they would serve as foot soldiers.”

To become members of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau—that was the choice that Neiko had chosen.

Surprisingly, Daisuke accepted her request readily. His reason being as he just explained. It seems that Neiko’s ability was desirable to the SEPB. Although her offensive ability was non-existent, she was able to swiftly restore injuries. That’s

why the SEPB lured Neiko's friends to the Ferris wheel, and switched their plan to a battle of attrition. They had given the order to Daisuke who just happened to be in the vicinity. On the other hand, Neiko's friends had realised that they could not escape, thus choosing to set up a surprise attack—.

Right now, they are able to ride the Ferris wheel due to Neiko restoring it to its original condition. After that, Neiko wanted to continue singing. Daisuke tried to stop her, saying, 'Don't use your power any more than necessarily', but.

—I want more people to see how beautiful these streets are.....

Neiko said so with a smile while looking at Arisu.

—Thank you.....

She did not know what was the “thank you” for, but in any case, it seems that Neiko was determined to continue living.

After a while, seeing that everything had returned to normal, the customers that had evacuated returned to the plaza. With only Arisu and Daisuke was left at the scene, the boy silently joined the queue for the Ferris wheel. Wondering what was he doing, Arisu joined the queue by his side.

Ena and Takako should have reached their homes by now. In the aftermath of the incident, Arisu had contacted the servant of Takako's house, who took the unconscious Takako and Ena back home.

A silver light danced about the night view which Arisu was looking at. It was the Morpho butterfly. In the distance, she could see the lights from the hospital which Mari was in.

“I see..... I wonder if this was for the best?”

Just as Arisu was speaking.

Like a drop falling into a puddle, reflected in Arisu's eye looking at the hospital's light, a ripple expanded.

—Isn't it beautiful, that Ferris wheel—

“.....Arisu?”

Seeing Arisu behave strangely, Daisuke called out to her.

But, his voice did not reach her. A piece of memory flashed through her mind like lightning.

—Then, let's go together when you are discharged!

The Morpho butterfly. And also, the Ferris wheel.

That day, the one who had said that with her back facing the window was her.

No, that's wrong.

The one who had said that was the girl called Ichinokuro Arisu.

—Yea, it's a promise—.

The one nodding was herself, Hanashiro Mari.

Mari had been looking forward to that promise very much.

When she had mentioned the promise to *Sensei*, he had also smiled happily —.

“*Sensei*.....?”

Mari muttered.

“Arisu?”

“.....!”

At Daisuke's voice, Arisu came to.

What was that.....? Just now—.

That scene flashing past Arisu's mind made her feel out of place.

A memory of the past? No, that's not it..... I saw myself there—.

“N-nothing, nevermind.”

“.....There's no point worrying about them anymore. They have decided upon



it themselves. But.....”

To him, Arisu appeared to be worrying about the well-being of Neiko and her friends. Looking at the night view expressionlessly till now, Daisuke glared at Arisu.

“This is not some child’s play. If I’m teamed up with some half-hearted folks, they would only be dead weight to us..... Good grief, why did some busybody idiot just have to stick her nose in.....”

At Daisuke’s words, Arisu woke up from her daydream, groaning with a *muu*.

“Then, what do you expect me to do?”

“Didn’t I tell you before to just not do anything.”

“Didn’t I also say that I don’t like not doing anything.”

“You’re just being wilful. *Haah*..... That’s why I hate spoiled young ladies ignorant of worldly matters like you.....”

“What’s with that, acting all so high and mighty. Blushing like a tomato just by being hugged by Ena and Takako, you’re just a pervy brat.”

“T-that’s completely unrelated! In the first place, if it wasn’t Saionji-san but someone flat like a washboard like you, I wouldn’t—”

*“Arisu punch~!”*

“Did you thought I was just going to let you punch me!”

Repelling her punches with his hands, he unintentionally hit her face. Holding her nose, Arisu flared her eyebrows.

“You..... you dare hit me! And on my face too.....!”

“W-what, you’re always hitting me too.....!”

The scuffle between the two continued throughout the ride till they reached the ground with the attendant stopping them.

The vestiges of a bell chime could be heard echoing across the moonlit night sky.

# Episode 03. The Rest Day Crushing Dream

Ichinokuro Arisu starts her morning grumbling about pain.

The cold morning wind deeply permeated her fiercely beaten shoulders. The birds chirping brightly in the courtyard seemed as though they were laughing at the scowling Arisu.

“Doing this everyday, every morning. Surely, there’s no other middle schooler who thinks of dying other than me.”

The wooden floor was as cold as ice. Creaking sounds could be heard as she walked down the passage barefooted.

The Ichinokuro house had a side building separate from the main building, and even further away was the training hall. Arisu stayed in the main building with her parents and grandfather, while the servants and her instructor occupied the side building.

Dressed in a dougi and hakama<sup>[3]</sup> used for training, Arisu walked down the passage leading to the main building with a sullen expression. She had just finished her early morning practice, an old custom in the Ichinokuro family.

“In this modern era, what’s the point of learning all these obsolete self-defence techniques—”

“Good morning, young lady.”

Crossing each other by the side building, an old lady wearing an apron greeted Arisu. She had served the Ichinokuro family over three generations, having taken care of all the needs of Arisu, her mother and grandmother.

“Good morning.”

Arisu walked past her with a sour look, but turned back again.

—It’s frustratingly..... but it’s good to have her around.

She reluctantly admitted, thinking back about all that's happened to her recently.

"What about Daisuke? Has he woken up?"

"No, I think he is still sleeping."

A vein popped up on Arisu's forehead. She ignored the 'because it is still early in the morning' coming from behind her, and hastened her footsteps.

Practically rushing down the corridor, Arisu came to the main building. She walked past the antique corridor lined by paper sliding doors.

Currently, apart from Arisu's family, there was also a special guest staying in the main building.

The circumstances that led to him living under the same roof was complicated, but more importantly—.

"It's simply unforgivable for a lowly freeloader like him to wake up later than his master!"

Arisu stopped in front of a sliding door.

She opened the sliding door stealthily. In the middle of the dim room, a teenage boy was sleeping in a futon.

He was Kusuriya Daisuke.

Having met Arisu due to a certain incident, he was on a mission to observe her by enrolling in the same school as her.

"Looking at that blissful sleeping face pisses me off till no end."

Entering the room sneakily, Arisu moved to a corner. Taking a deep breath, she estimated internally for the right timing.

"Taste some of my agony! *Arisu dive*—"

With a running start, she was just about to throw herself atop the futon when.

".....Fuyu-..... hotaru....."

The boy's mouth moved, his face twisting into one of anguish for an instant.

Arisu came to a stop.

“Fuyuhotaru.....?”

Arisu hadn’t heard of that term before, nor seen such an expression of pain on his face before.

“To cause Daisuke to make such an expression..... *Fuyuhotaru*, just what is.....?”

With a look of contemplation, Arisu once again distanced herself from the futon.

“—Oh well, that’s that.”

She cleared her throat with a *kohon*.

“Once again, feel the divine punishment of your master! *Arisu dive~!*”

Building up her momentum with a short dash, Arisu threw herself at the futon.

That morning, a scream of pain could be heard coming from the main building.

## Part 1

The lunch break at Horusu Seijou Academy Middle School was relatively long.

Students had nearly an hour to do whatever they want. Be it moving their bodies playing on the sports ground, using the computer room, reading in the library or chatting with friends in the classroom.

Ichinokuro Arisu, Saionji Ena and Kujou Takako all belonged to the 'stay in classroom' faction.

Arisu already had plenty of exercise during her morning practice, while Takako was a computer idiot and was generally bad with electronics. Meanwhile, Ena fared above average at all she tried, but she did not have a particular interest in any of them.

Kusuriya Daisuke had also remained in the classroom. He was engaged in a friendly conversation with several other boys.

"Before we even realised, Kusuriya-kun sure got friendly with the class. Aren't you lonely now, Arisu?"

Sitting at the desk in front of her, Ena teased Arisu. That attitude of hers had not changed at all since from before.

—Just a few days ago, Ena had been caught up in a certain incident.

Together with Arisu and Takako, they had visited a Ferris wheel that was a place of interest in the city. The incident had occurred there.

*Mushi*—.

Infesting young boys and girls, they were an existence that fed on their hopes and dreams in order to grow. In one sentence, that would be how those monsters, which have since permeated into society, could be described. The people who were infested by the Mushi were known as *Mushitsuki*, having since become synonymous as agents of fear. At the Ferris wheel, Ena had

witnessed the Mushi with her own eyes.

That was not the first time that Arisu and Takako had saw a Mushi. In fact, it was during an incident caused by Takako's childhood friend who was a Mushitsuki, that Arisu met Daisuke. Daisuke was actually an agent of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau—a secret government organisation that employs Mushitsuki in order to capture other Mushitsuki, so as to maintain the government's stance of "Mushi do not exist".

Ena was sent home that night after fainting when she saw the Mushi. Even so, she had attended school as per usual the next day.

When Arisu had touched on that topic gingerly to her, she had replied, 'I don't ever want to be involved with that kind of monsters ever again', putting an end to that matter.

The warning by SEPB not to disclose of the happenings came as expected, but it seems to be unneeded as the person herself did not ever want to have anything to do with the Mushi again. Still, Arisu needed to take care to not divulge her possession of the silver Morpho butterfly, or that of Daisuke's true identity.

"....."

Arisu bit on the straw of her milk packet, staring at Daisuke intently.

No matter how one looked at him, the boy known as Kusuriya Daisuke was just an ordinary student. He had an unremarkable appearance and a sociable personality, able to have a friendly chat with just about anyone.

However, Arisu knew that that was just a facade. Whenever he was dealing with Arisu, his attitude would be a complete flip from when he was at school, behaving as an agent of the SEPB, a Devil without a single shred of mercy.

"Arisu-san?"

Takako looked at Arisu strangely.

"He definitely didn't open his heart!"

Arisu smashed the milk packet onto the desk with a *don!*

Ena and Takako looked at Arisu in puzzlement.

“The one who didn’t open his heart..... you mean Daisuke-san?”

“Is that so? It seems to me that he’s behaving very naturally though.”

“The two of you just don’t understand! You have no idea what kind of lousy attitude he has at home, tyrannising around like a hooligan! Just this morning when I went to wake him up with a *jumping dive*, he wouldn’t stop complaining the entire time!”

“.....That sounds more like you’re not sparing a thought for Kusuriya-kun’s feelings.”

“I feel bad for Daisuke-san.....”

Arisu glared at the sighing Ena and Takako.

“The fact that he changes his attitude based on where and who he’s talking to proves that he has not opened his heart to anyone! I can’t let this go on. I must strip away his mask of deceit!”

“Where does all your enthusiasm even come from?”

“As the master, it is my responsibility to relieve the pain and suffering of my servants!”

Looking at Arisu who was clenching her fist, Takako craned her neck questioning, ‘Is that so?’, while Ena grinned happily, saying, ‘Well, this seems interesting, why not?’

Arisu and Daisuke had been living under the same roof for one month already.

However, rather than finding out more about him, all she had were more questions. What is the SEPB? How was he able to capture other Mushitsuki so cold-heartedly. On the contrary, why is he acting so cheerfully when facing the others.

There was a reason why Arisu was so interested in Daisuke.

That was because of her late friend, Hanashiro Mari.

Mari had been a Mushitsuki, but Arisu had not known.

After Mari passed away, her Mushi began appearing around by Arisu’s side.

And thus, she realised that Mari was a Mushitsuki.

Arisu wanted to know what exactly were the Mushi. She thought that if she knew what the Mushi and Mushitsuki are, she would have some clues about what Mari had been thinking about.

And right now, the Mushitsuki closest to her was Kusuriya Daisuke.

“I hereby announce! The *‘Remodel Daisuke Project’*!”

Ena and Takako gave an applause along with the sound of ‘ooh’s at Arisu’s declaration.

“So, what’s the plan?”

“Of course, that’s what we’re gonna brainstorm about right now! Now, feel free to spit out any ideas you have!”

“I should’ve guessed that we’d the ones providing the ideas, huh.”

The girls faced each other in deliberation.

During this time, Daisuke’s conversation with his classmates came into Arisu’s ears.

“Hey, Kusuriya-kun. You free tomorrow?”

The one calling out to the chatting Daisuke was a male student with a baby face known as Mihayashi. He asked Daisuke with an affable smile on his face.

“Eh? What’s up?”

“You know our sister school, the Emilia Women’s College, located at Higano City next door? We are having a gathering with some girls from there to deepen our acquaintance, but we lack some heads. If you are free, how about joining us?”

“From what you’re saying, that sounds like a mixer..... Firstly, why me?”

“That’s because you seem like a nice guy. You don’t look like the type to ditch us all of a sudden last minute..... and, I’d rather not invite those who can’t read social cues.”

Mihayashi said so with a transparent smile.



In other words, he was saying that he wants to be the highlight. Although his way of speaking was frank, the combination of his childish face and bright smile seemed to halve the brusqueness. Daisuke smiled bitterly.

“Although you came out of the way to invite me..... I’m sorry to have to reject you as I’m bad at that kind of stuff.”

Arisu and the rest lifted their eyebrows.

The three girls all stood up at once with a ‘*gatan!*’, casting the spotlight of the class upon them.

“You will go!”

Arisu stuck her index finger out towards Daisuke. Ena and Takako whispered to each other behind, with, ‘Indeed, that would be interesting to see’, ‘But, that has nothing to do with opening his heart, doesn’t it..... And I was also caught up in the momentum and stood up so suddenly.....’.

“That’s right, you’re plain and boring and have nothing to show! But, put some guts to it and show that you can seize the limelight!”

Daisuke plainly revealed a look of annoyance.

“This has nothing to do with you, Ichinokuro-san. I have already said I do not want to—”

“*Fuyuhotaru.....*”

Arisu said softly.

Daisuke’s reaction was much greater than expected. With his eyes wide open, he stared at Arisu.

“.....!”

He walked towards Arisu briskly with a strict expression. Pulling her by her arm, he brought her to a corner of the classroom.

“Why does someone like you know that name?”

With his back facing the other students, he questioned Arisu sharply. In contrast to his previous smiling face, there was a look of intimidation in his eye.

But, Arisu was unperturbed.

“So that was actually the name of a person. Seeing as how you called Neiko-san with a codename as *Nene* previously, I thought that this might’ve been one as well.”

“Answer the question!”

“You were talking in your sleep this morning. Also, you had a look of sadness.”

Arisu grinned. Daisuke looked like he could not find his words, his face turning red.

“That reaction..... *Fuyuhotaru* must have been referring to a girl, right?”

“I”

“.....That is really the case?”

Seeing Daisuke visibly discomposed, Arisu was surprised.

I can make use of this—thought Arisu with a plain smirk.

“You will attend the mixer tomorrow, right?”

“No way. Why do I have to attend something like that? In the first place, my mission is to monitor you. Not to mention, the investigation into Hanashiro Mari hasn’t been progressing at all.....”

“*Heh*, I see. So you’re going to go against my order. ....Hey, Ena. Did you know, Daisuke already has a girl he likes. Her name is *Fuyuhota*—”

Daisuke quickly covered Arisu’s mouth.

“.....Who likes who? Since when did I ever say anything like that.”

“Gyu’ll affend gomolows mider, yight?” (You will attend tomorrow’s mixer, right?) Even with her mouth covered, Arisu repeated. Their classmates looked from a distance at the two who were glaring at each other.

Clicking his tongue, Daisuke released his hand from Arisu. His despondent sigh was a sign of his defeat.

“I just need to go, right. Just go.....”

Arisu exchanged a thumbs-up with Mihayashi.

“Mihayashi-kun, include Daisuke too!”

*“Oui, Mademoiselle!”*

Daisuke sighed so deeply that it seemed as if his soul would come out with it.

“.....Why do I have to attend a mixer.....”

“Be grateful for your master’s kind consideration. Don’t act so savage all the time, take a break once in a while.”

“I just need to attend it right. In return—”

Daisuke returned to his seat and turned back to look at Arisu. His cold gaze causing Arisu to take a gulp.

“Don’t ever mention that name out again. Got it?”

“.....I know already.”

Daisuke sat down on his seat, grumbling in a soft voice, ‘Why do I have to..... if I do this..... what about the mission.....’

“If it’s about that, don’t worry.”

Arisu puffed up her chest and said.

Having a bad premonition, Daisuke slowly turn behind and asked.

“.....What do you mean?”

“Of course, I’ll be attending too! This way, it’s convenient for you too, right?”

Arisu declared unreservedly.

This time, Daisuke clearly fell into despair.

## Part 2

In Akamaki City, several establishments operated around the underground train station.

Especially at the city centre, various walkways crisscrossed each another to form a complex maze. All leading to the station, the walkways formed an underground street.

Arisu nodded to herself in a high-class boutique at the corner of the underground street.

“Well, this should be fine.”

The mirror in the fitting room reflected the figure of Arisu in a silk one-piece dress. Her usual ponytail was missing, replaced a bun above her ears.

Leaving the fitting room, Arisu could smell the fragrance of a luxury perfume. She walked across the store, passing by a shelf lined with custom-made perfumes.

“Here here, Kusuriya-kun. Try this next! It’ll definitely suit you! Ah, can you give him a swept back hairstyle?”

“Certainly.”

“Jeez, Ena-san! I think this look suits him much better.”

“Then, try that next! If’s it Kusuriya-kun, anything would look good on him!”

In the menswear corner, voices in high spirits could be heard.

Ena and Takako were standing in front of the fitting room with bright smiles and several outfits in hand. On the other side, the curtain opened to reveal Daisuke inside.

“Ahaha.....”

To describe him as a carp on a chopping board would have been apt. With an

empty smile on his face, he looked to have given up on any resistance. The clerk attending to him used a comb to style his hair as Ena and Takako requested.

“Come on, Daisuke-kun! Hurry up and change your clothes! You may need to wear that next time—oh, Arisu. That looks good on you!”

“You look very cute, Arisu-san!”

“That goes without saying!”

Arisu flashed the victory sign.

Sparing Arisu just one glance, the two girls immediately turned back to Daisuke.

“We’re almost out of time! Just bring all these outfits along! Get changed in three minutes!”

“I’m sure they will fit you, Daisuke-san.”

“.....Ichinokuro-san.....”

Daisuke implored Arisu with his eyes, causing to feel just a bit of pity for him.

“You can refuse a little, Daisuke.....”

“Stop dragging your feet! Come on, hurry up!”

The current Daisuke who was being chased into the fitting room by Ena seems much more haggard compared to yesterday.

By the time his outfit was decided, it was already near evening.

Dressed in a black suit with necktie, he almost appeared to be a different person.



“*Kyah!* You look so dashing, Kusuriya-kun! The girls on the other side will definitely, definitely fall for you at first sight!”

“You look superb, Daisuke-san!”

“T-thank you.”

He replied with a bitter smile in a low voice, looking as if he was trying very hard to hold back something.

Daisuke made to stop Arisu from making the payment by card, saying, ‘I’ll pay for my own’. But, after seeing the price tag, he instantaneously went silent. They seemed to hear him muttering to himself, ‘*Kuh*, you could buy a car with that.....’.

“Do you understand, Kusuriya-kun? Those young ladies from the Emilia Women’s College don’t have much worldly knowledge or anything. If you just whisper some sweet nothings to them, you can easily trick them. Want to learn some pick-up lines?”

“What do you mean trick them, Saionji-san.....”

“Do you have a handkerchief? To not appear impolite, make sure to greet them crisply when you meet them for the first time. See now, your necktie is crooked.”

“I-I can do it myself, Kujou-san.”

Before leaving the store, Ena and Takako each gave their advice to Daisuke. Finally free from their attention, Daisuke and Arisu headed to the venue. Ena waved them off with a final, ‘Good luck!’, while Takako had a look of nervousness on her face.

The place where they were going to ‘deepen their acquaintance’ as put by their classmate seemed to be a restaurant in the underground street. It was within a walkable distance.

Arisu and Daisuke walked side by side down the main walkway of the underground street.

“Cut me some slack..... Why do I have to do something as pointless as this anyway.”

Grouching with a sigh, Daisuke messed up his styled hair with his hands. Shaking his head left and right like a dog, his hairstyle returned to its original look.

“Ah, hey. To think it was set so nicely too.”

Arisu said as she elbowed him.

And then, she hit something solid underneath his clothes.

“.....You’re bringing along something like that even now?”

Arisu glared Daisuke having deduced what it was.

A butterfly which appeared out of nowhere landed on Arisu’s shoulder.

Spreading its silver coloured wings, it was the Morpho butterfly.

“Isn’t that obvious. Who knows when your..... no, Hanashiro Mari’s Mushi would do something.”

When he pointed his sharp gaze at the Morpho butterfly, it flew away.

Hanashiro Mari’s Mushi—.

The silver Morpho butterfly started appearing around Arisu nearly one year ago. Around that time, Arisu’s close friend, Mari, had left the world.

Daisuke walked ahead of Arisu, preventing her from seeing his expression.

Kusuriya Daisuke was also a Mushitsuki, just as Mari was.

Despite living together in the same house, he never interacts with Arisu beyond what was necessary. She could not imagine what he was thinking at all.

—Could I ever hope to understand the feelings of a Mushitsuki..... what do you think, Mari?

In her heart, Arisu spoke to her deceased close friend.

As if in response, the Morpho butterfly resting on Arisu’s shoulder seemed to be hanging its head down.



## Part 3

Arisu and Daisuke came to a stop in front of a restaurant.

“Looks like this is the place. Let’s hurry up and enter.”

Arisu took a step into the restaurant. However, Daisuke was still standing outside the restaurant in a daze.

“What’s the matter? Hurry up and enter.”

“.....Since it’s a mixer, I thought that it would be at a karaoke or something but.....”

The place Mihayashi had specified was a so-called high-class restaurant. The kind of restaurant that seemed to serve primarily French cuisine. In front of the restaurant, there was a wooden sign which read, ‘Customers in improper attires are not allowed in the restaurant.’

“What a fool. Didn’t I say that we need to be in formal wear. You should’ve expected this much.”

“If you ask me, who would’ve expected that middle schoolers would come to a restaurant as lavish as like this.....”

The moment they entered the restaurant, they were approached by attendants dressed in tuxedo. After Arisu told them Mihayashi’s name, they were escorted inside.

The atmosphere of the restaurant exuded splendour.

Beyond the entrance, there was only a passageway that led into the restaurant. The brick laid walls were lighted dimly by lamps placed evenly along the wall. Each table was covered by a beautifully embroidered cloth and had a glass shade with a candle in it. Potted plants were placed throughout the restaurant and classical music played in the background, contributing to the elegant atmosphere. As a matter of fact, most of the other customers were

adults.

“O-oi, is it really this restaurant? It sure doesn’t look like a place for kids.”

“Stop acting so flustered. Gosh, you’re so timid in some strange areas.”

The table which they were led to was the biggest and furthest one inside. There were already four teenage boys and girls seated around the table.

“Good evening, Ichinokuro-san, Kusuriya-kun.”

The one who stood up and greeted them was Mihayashi.

“This restaurant is managed by my father, isn’t it endearing? Right above our heads, the boutique in construction is already in a deal with us to advertise our restaurant.”

Mihayashi disclosed that as Arisu and Daisuke found their seats. The female students from Emilia Women’s College showered him with words of praise such as, ‘That’s amazing!’ and ‘Isn’t the great!’.

However, when he glimpsed a look at Daisuke, his cheeks spasmed for a second.

“Is that so. Well, I guess it’s pretty good compared to other restaurants.”

“.....What’s the matter, Daisuke? You’re acting assertive all of a sudden.”

“For some reason, I just feel irritated. If I keep acting all nervous, it’ll just make me look like a loser.”

“That’s the spirit.”

Arisu and Daisuke whispered to each other in soft voices.

“Can we just wait for a bit longer. One of the girls have not yet returned.”

As she listened to Mihayashi, Arisu suddenly felt something wrapping around the table.

“.....Vines?”

It was something that resembled the vines of a tree. The gnarly vines crept up the table leg and stretched across the dining table. Thinking it was part of the restaurant’s interior design, Arisu touched one of the vines before quickly

retracting her hands.

“What’s the matter?”

Daisuke turned to look at Arisu. She just shook her head, saying, ‘O-oh. It’s nothing.’

It feels warm—.

A warmth could be felt from the vine, as if it was something alive. Feeling creeped out, Arisu looked away from the vine.

“Ah, looks like she have returned.”

Hearing what Mihayashi said, Arisu raised her head.

She saw the figure of a girl walking towards them.

“I-I’m sorry. It looks like everyone has arrived.”

She had a small figure and a short haircut which looked good on her. Her blue dress had a sense of translucency to it and it matched the blue ribbon on her bangs above her right eye.

“.....”

Sneaking a peek at Daisuke, she saw that he was fixated on the girl.

—Looks like his target for today has been decided.

Arisu grinned to herself. It was no surprise that Daisuke was focused on her. Out of the three girls, she was the most eye-catching of them.

“I hope for us who belonged to sister schools, Horusu Seijou Academy and Emilia Women’s College, to get to know each other better than ever before! Cheers!”

Following Mihayashi’s voice, everyone raised their glass of orange juice and toasted.

The girl with the ribbon introduced herself as Hasegawa Inori.

Inori sat opposite to Arisu and Daisuke who had arrived last.

“E-erm.....”

“Um.....”

Both Inori and Daisuke spoke out at the same time. After which, an awkward silence unfolded as the two remained unspoken.

“What are you being so stiff for, Daisuke. Even though you seemed to be just fine messing around with Ena and Takako.”

“Wha-! You idiot, who’s messing around with who ! That was just Saionji-san.....”

“There, there, no need to air your dirty laundry in public.”

Seeing Arisu and Daisuke squabbling, Inori chuckled.

“The two of you are very interesting. You look like you’re quite close.”

“Aah, please don’t mind me. I’m sort of like his guardian.”

“Who are you saying is my guardian.....?”

“Come now, Daisuke. Why don’t you chat more with Hasegawa-san. It’s rude to ignore someone, you know.”

Following her words, Daisuke turned around to face Inori with a look of reluctance.

“Um, Hasegawa-san.”

“Yes?”

With some looks of reservation, Daisuke and Inori faced each other. Instead of starting off with a self-introduction, Daisuke had a look of worry on his face.

“Your complexion looks kind of bad. Even while walking here just now, you seemed to be wobbling. Are you feeling unwell somewhere?”

Inori had a look of surprise on her face.

Now that he mentioned it, Arisu realised that Inori’s cheeks were pale. Perhaps she was trying to hide that fact, as one could not tell with just one look.

“If you are sick, you shouldn’t force yourself and should go home to rest.”

In contrast to the concerned Daisuke, Inori smiled.

Arisu whispered secretly to Daisuke.

“I see. So that’s your plan to get close to her by sending her home yourself.

.....You should know better than to strike so early, Daisuke. There's an order to everything—”

“Shut up, you're being annoying.”

As expected, Daisuke shot back softly.

“Thank you for the concern, but I am fine.”

Inori shook her head.

“I..... want to visit many place, and meet many different kind of people. Those places I visited and the people I met would become my cherished memories, and if I could remain in the hearts of those people and places, wouldn't that be wonderful?”

She said so with a refreshing smile.

“Ah..... I guess that was quite weird, right. To suddenly spout off like that..... even though we're not even that close. ....E-erm, I'm sorry saying something strange.”

Seeing Inori hang her head in embarrassment, Daisuke's expression softened. It was the first time that Arisu saw him with such a kind smile.

“That's definitely not the case.”

“Eh?”

“I think it would be great if that dream comes true.”

Faced with his kind smile, Inori's cheeks reddened.

“T-thank you. You're a kind person aren't you, Kusuriya-kun.”

Saying so, Inori beamed a smile back.



Daisuke's probably blushing now—thinking so, Arisu turned to look at him, but for some reason, he seemed to be biting his lips for an instant. The look of pain he had for a moment was immediately replaced with a friendly smile.

—An hour later.

“No matter how many times I have said it, you seriously lack any self-awareness. Not only do you not seem to understand the situation you are in, you also like to actively stick your neck into trouble.....”

“Who are you to talk, you are the one lacking the awareness of being a servant. Just last night, you went to use the bath before I did. It's unthinkable for a squatter like you to use the bath before your master.”

“That reminds me. The one who put the sign saying, ‘In use. Daisuke prohibited’, was you, wasn't it. You look too highly on yourself, even a monkey wouldn't want to peek at you bathing.”

“That's what all the peekers would say. In the first place, the fact that you saw that sign means that you came in while I was in the bathroom—Wait a minute, idiot Daisuke. What are you doing, speaking only to me.”

Arisu hit Daisuke's head with a *pechin*.

Before they realised, they had been talking in a world of their own.

It seems that the other two boys are also interested in Hasegawa Inori as well. Especially Mihayashi who have been proactively engaged in a conversation with her, occupying all her attention. In the end, the only proper exchange Daisuke had with Inori was the short chat in the beginning.

When Daisuke looked towards Inori, she also looked back. Despite looking like she wanted to speak to Daisuke, Mihayashi immediately called out to her.

“Heh, so Hasegawa-san belongs to a lineage of doctors. Then, you too?”

“U-um, no.”

Looking away from Daisuke, she shook her head.

“Because..... there is something else I want to do.”

“Something else you want to do?”

“I want to visit many different places and meet many different people..... that’s why in the future—”

Her words suddenly cut off. All expression seemed to be disappear from her face as well.

With the surrounding gaze gathered onto her in puzzlement, she came to with a start.

“S-sorry..... Erm, I was talking about my future, right. I want to travel overseas. Something like a diplomat.....”

Inori has a smile on her face, but it looked transient. Her breathing seemed to quicken, revealing her exhaustion.

“You can’t do that as a doctor?”

“Do you know the foreign museum in the neighbouring town?”

Signs of life returned to Inori’s face. Even Arisu, who was of the same gender, thought that the joyful smile on Inori’s face looked cute.

“When I was young, my parents brought me there and I saw many things for the first time. All the photographs and flowers I saw, including the diversity of people working there..... that left a deep impression in me—I began to think that one day, I want to see it for myself. That was the place where I founded my dream..... that’s why, someday I want to go back there.”

“Aah, the foreign museum at Higano City. I had also been there before when I was young.”

Mihayashi smiled to express interest.

“It is truly a pity that that place is now gone.”

Inori widened her eyes.

“.....*Eh*.....?”

Arisu had been to the foreign museum before as well. However, this was the first time that she had heard that it was gone.

“I see, I guess there are still many who have not known. Due to the operations being unprofitable, the sponsors withdrew. As my father’s company was



involved as well, this came into my ear. I think they have already begun the demolition work at part of the site. I heard that a shopping mall will occupy that area a few years down the road instead.

“.....”

The eyes of the now silent Inori was wavering.

Arisu nudged Daisuke's shoulder.

“You go join into the conversation too.”

“.....That has nothing to do with me. In the first place, I have already mentioned that I have no interest in this sort of meeting.”

Daisuke averted his face.

“Once again, you're just gonna withdraw into your shell.”

“What do you mean shell.”

“Can't you just be honest for a bit. Hasegawa-san's matter interest you, right?”

“Nope, not at all.”

Daisuke glared at Arisu indifferently.

“She resembled someone I knew..... that's why I was a bit surprised, that's all.”

“Who is it, the one whom you say she resembled?”

“That has nothing to do with you.”

Being refused so bluntly, Arisu puckered her lips.

“Well, I had already expected that things would end up like that. That's why I came; you would be lonely all by yourself, right, so you can go ahead and just talk to me.”

To the grinning Arisu, Daisuke turned his face with a *'hmp'*. Seeing his childish gesture brought a smile to Arisu's face.

Arisu tried to raise her glass to signal to the waiter to refill her orange juice.

“.....!”

Startled, she pulled back her hands.

Arisu could not move her glass. The bottom of the glass has been entwined by a wooden vine.

Looking more closely, there were red swellings on the vine. It looked to be flower buds, but the mass of petals could be seen to be wriggling.

“W-what is this.....?”

At the same time as Arisu shouted.

“Hasegawa-san?”

At Mihayashi’s shout, Arisu and Daisuke turned to look at Inori.

Inori seemed to have dropped her glass. Her body leaned limply on the chair and her eyes were hollow.

“What is that.....!”

*“Kyaah!”*

Screams resounded in the restaurant.

The scene reflect in her eyes caused Arisu to be at a loss for words.

Countless vines had emerged from the ground, occupying the inside of the restaurant. Besides grabbing the customers, the vines also reached up for the chandelier in the ceiling.

The flower buds on the vines all opened at once, releasing a pink powder.

“Arisu.....!”

Daisuke responded quickly. Grabbing Arisu, he leapt off the table, avoiding being ensnared by the vines.

The people who breathed in the powder fainted one by one.

The thing which they thought was a flower, was in fact not a flower. Inside of the flower buds that were open, rows of teeth could be seen. It looked to be the mouthpieces of some kind of creature.

This is—.

Arisu widened her eyes.

“It can’t be..... a Mushi?”

Daisuke moved to an area with not much vines and let go of Arisu.

“*Tch.* Who and where the hell is the person doing something like this.....”

Speaking in a low voice that seemed to belong to someone else, Daisuke reached under his suit. He unsheathed two black objects from the hidden holder underneath.

He put on a huge goggle with practiced movement. Lights flickered in the lens, which covered everything above his nose. On his right hand, he held a large automatic handgun.

“I’m going to clear up this mess before it affects the outside. You just stay back.”

The Kusuriya Daisuke in front of her had transformed into the self which belonged as an agent of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau. Even the features that the goggle could not hide have disappeared, and his voice turned cold and devoid of emotions.

The powder spewing out from the flower-resembling mouthpiece seemed to have a sleep-inducing effect. Starting from Mihayashi, all the other customers apart from Arisu and Daisuke began to lose consciousness.

“To defeat such a big Mushi, we must strike its main body..... Or perhaps looking for its host would be—”

He was cut off halfway.

The vines began to expand explosively before Arisu’s eyes.

In no time, the vines had reached the chandelier on the ceiling, several times that of Arisu’s height. The vines penetrated the brick exterior and into the asphalt wall behind, smashing many beautiful paintings lining the wall.

“Wha-.....!”

Arisu and Daisuke’s voice overlapped.

Along with the explosive growth of the vine, the flowers on the stem grew to gigantic proportions. The buds bloomed one by one, spraying out more spore-

like powder.

In the devastated interior of the restaurant, the classical music riddles with noise approached its climax.

Amidst the cracking music, a silver Morpho butterfly landed on Arisu's shoulder.

"Mari.....?"

The Morpho butterfly flew towards a tall standing light. Its body morphed, extending silver feelers that fused with the standing light.

The Morpho butterfly which had turned into a shining spear dispersed silver scales in all directions. The powder approaching Arisu and Daisuke was blown away by the scales.

"What is happening.....! Isn't it just a Mushi?"

Holding the spear in her hand, Arisu turned towards Daisuke. He only stared at the scene, biting his lips.

"There's no control over the movement of this Mushi..... it's maturing!"

Maturation—.

Arisu recalled what Daisuke had told her before.

Mushitsuki can make use of their Mushi's power in exchange for their dream. If their Mushi is killed, their dream disappears as well, turning them into Fallen which has no thoughts or emotions. Even if their Mushi is not killed, they would die one day when their dream is completely consumed by their Mushi.

Mushi which have completely devoured the dream of their host are no longer bounded to them, maturing into a state that can take independent actions.

That was what maturation refers to.

Matured Mushi are incomparably powerful compared to before.

"That is..... maturation?"

"The Mushi has already freed itself from its host. Nothing can stop it from growing bigger and rampaging any more."

Arisu could feel the ground vibrating under her feet. Who knows if the vines had already penetrated the foundation of the underground street.

“Wait a minute..... that means the owner of the Mushi is already.....!”

Arisu came to a realisation. Daisuke clicked his tongue.

“The host should be quite weak by now. At this rate, not only will the host die..... the whole underground street may collapse as well. Before that happens, we need to find the main body of the Mushi and kill it.”

“Kill the Mushi..... then wouldn’t the host turn into a Fallen!”

“.....”

Daisuke did not reply to Arisu’s words. He just looked around the restaurant mechanically, the light from the goggles glowing in the darkened interior.

“Stay where you are. If you used the power of Hanashiro Mari’s Mushi here, it would blow away the rest of the customers as well.”

Hearing that, Arisu bit her lips. The power of the spear was absolutely unparalleled. As Daisuke mentioned, using it in an enclosed area like this would cause casualties.

“If it completely matures, even I would not be able to handle it. It would be too late by then. ....*Tch*, seems like there’s no other members nearby. Looks like reinforcement will not arrive in time.”

Daisuke said with one hand on the goggle. The goggles probably came with communication functions as well.

“It can’t be too late.....”

Turning back, Arisu widened her eyes.

—I would love to visit many different places and meet many different people.  
Arisu recalled that reserved yet charming smile.

“It can’t be.....”

Arisu’s face twisted. Seeing her expression, Daisuke followed her line of sight.

“.....!”

What he saw made him speechless as well.

At the table where Arisu and the rest were dining at earlier, a gigantic flower had blossomed there. The pale pink petals quivered, being in the process of spreading open even now.

As if under the watchful gaze of the gigantic flower, a girl wrapped in vines was being held up in the air.

The girl—Hasegawa Inori, looked down at Arisu and Daisuke with hollow eyes.

## Part 4

Above the head of Inori whose limbs were bound by vines, a gigantic flower slowly unravelled itself.

“Hasegawa..... -san.....?”

A Daisuke muttered in shock.

A deafening roar resounded through the underground street—no, throughout Akamaki City.

The colour of the flower deepened from pink to crimson as it opened.

What the petals protected was neither stamens nor pistils. It was rows of hundreds of sharp fangs.

Carnivorous flower—.

That phrase found itself in Arisu’s mind.

Arisu recalled an insect exhibition she had visited when she was young, there she saw a crab spider that mimicked itself as a flower in order to attract its prey. But right now, what was right in front of her was an irregularly shaped monster which undoubtedly consumed people instead.

“.....!”

The sound of destruction drowned out the classical music, inundating Arisu and the rest like a wave.

When the rumbling subsided, the world was silent.

In front of the overwhelmed and immobilised Arisu and Daisuke, Inori’s lips moved slightly.

“.....I was.....”

Probably near the brink of unconsciousness, Inori’s hands and legs did not

even move an inch. Her faintly opened eyes were gradually becoming vacant.

“.....Even when the Mushi consumed my dreams..... even though it was scary..... and painful..... even so, I persisted.....”

Inori’s pupil moved. In her sights was Daisuke.

“I wanted to go to so many more places..... to become an adult..... and then visit that foreign museum again..... I want to return there..... and thank them for giving me a dream.....”

The girl smiled. It was a fleeting smile, one filled with sorrow.

“But..... it seems..... my dream is..... disappearing.....”

The vines start to swell again. The people who had lost consciousness on the floor were being buried by the vines as they watched on.

“Hasegawa-san.....!”

Arisu shouted reflexively.

Inori became expressionless, her eyelids closing.

What would happen when she fully closed her eyes—just thinking about it caused Arisu to feel dread.

The moment when their dream is completely consumed by their Mushi, the Mushitsuki dies—.

“.....!”

I won’t allow something like that.....!

Arisu exerted strength into her hands holding the spear.

Mari—.

Arisu recalled the face of her close friend who had departed this world one year ago.

She had no idea what the Mushi are. She couldn’t even begin to imagine what were the Mushitsuki thinking as well.

However, she would not allow anything to deprive Hasegawa Inori of her life.

Even if Arisu had to kill Inori’s Mushi and turn her into a Fallen, she would not



let her life be extinguished right in front of herself.

I will not let the Mushi kill anyone else.....!

She would no longer remain unknowing and turn a blind eye like what had happened to Mari. With these feelings, Arisu jumped towards the flower.

However—.

*“Kuh.....!”*

She thought otherwise of swinging the spear. If she had used its power here, the rest of the customers would be caught up in the destruction as well.

“Daisuke!”

Arisu turned towards the boy.

Daisuke was an agent specialising in capturing Mushitsuki. Till now, he had turned countless Mushitsuki to Fallen.

Arisu had no doubts that Daisuke would have been poised with his handgun cool-headedly even in this situation.

“.....Daisuke?”

But, contrary to her expectations, Daisuke was just staring at Inori’s figure in a daze. His hand holding the handgun was trembling slightly.

“What are you doing, Daisuke.....! Get a hold of yourself!”

Arisu’s reprimand did not seem to enter Daisuke’s ears. Large beads of sweat formed on his forehead as he stared at Inori.

“How can you..... still smile.....! In front of my eyes.....!”

Daisuke yelled, gnashing his teeth.

“Don’t give up! Don’t you dare lose such an important dream in a place like this!”

Raising his voice, Daisuke screamed.

Seeing the boy baring his emotions for the first time, Arisu was stunned.

“Daisuke.....?”

“You’re just like her, like *Fuyuhotaru*!”

Even with his face hidden by the goggle, one could tell that he was grimacing.

“The one who was turned into a Fallen by my own hands..... someone with the same dream as me.....!”

Then, Inori’s lids shut completely and the gigantic flower gave a huge roar, shaking the whole underground street.

“.....!”

The Inori who has run out of strength.

The wildly blooming Mushi.

Daisuke who looked like he was suffering, hesitating.

The figures of the suffering Mushitsuki were reflected in Arisu’s eye.

—This is, for me?—.

Arisu’s field of vision was dyed completely white.

“!”

Without even the time to shake, Arisu’s consciousness fell into disorder.

—Yes. This is a present from me to *Sensei*—.

Arisu—no, Mari was in a white hospital room.

A young man was standing next to the bed which Mari was lying down on.

The young man had a silver necklace in his hand. Hanging in the centre of the necklace was a golden ring.

Indeed, Mari had given him a present.

She was inside of her memory.

Inside of a dream that was about to disappear.

—This is another proof that I had lived.....

Hearing Mari's words, the young man had a look of pain.

However, Mari smiled brightly.

—The other proof, I leave with Arisu..... If she knew what my dream was, surely she would hate me for it.

“.....!”

Arisu awoke from her brief daydream.

—That mysterious scene again.....?

The memories which Arisu saw did not belong to her. The one sleeping on the bed in the hospital room was not Arisu. Arisu also did not recognise the young man.

The Mushi mimicking a flower roared again.

Looking at the girl who had closed her eyes, Arisu came to.

“Since it has come to this, I'll do it.....!”

Arisu recalled Inori's smile when she was talking about her dream.

Inori must live on.

She must live on and realise her dream.

Arisu would not let Inori's wish disappear just like that right in front of her. Even if Inori have to turn into a Fallen and lose her emotions, Arisu would not let her life and dream come to an end like what had happened to Mari.

She did not know how much she had to suppress the power of the spear, but she just had to do it.

Right when she turned towards Inori.

“*Kyaah!*”

“Uwaa!”

Innumerable vines shot out from the blooming flower above Inori’s head. The vines slammed the stationary Arisu and Daisuke against the wall.

The vines creeping along the wall restrained the two of them.

“Ah.....!”

Arisu had let go of the spear from the impact of the slam. Several tens, hundreds of vines surrounded Arisu and Daisuke as if to bury them.

Inori closed her eyes—.

“.....Kusuriya Daisuke!”

Arisu shouted.

Buried under the vines, Arisu looked into the eyes of the boy who was similar bounded.

“Where did your usual irritatingly composed self went to! Shouldn’t you be the one who knows most what should be done now?”

“.....!”

“I don’t know what happened in the past, but stop hesitating over it all the time! If it’s something that you did, take responsibility for it till the very end!”

“Someone like you..... who isn’t even a Mushitsuki, what would you know!”

Unable to tolerate any further, Daisuke bellowed.

“For the sake of my dream, I could only deprive other Mushitsuki of their dreams..... Someone like me—”

“If that’s the case, then why did you live up till now!”

“!”

Daisuke was struck speechless at that sentence.

“Even so, you wanted to fulfil your dreams, right! You wanted to continue to live on, right! Didn’t you turn that *Fuyuhotaru* into a Fallen knowing that she felt the same as you! Then don’t hesitate! As the one to live, you have that much of an obligation!”

A vine slithered up Arisu's neck. With a warm and woody sensation, it began to tighten around her neck.

"Open..... your eyes.....! Stupid..... Daisuke.....!"

Her field of vision was being covered by the vines.

Just before her view was completely obscured.

She saw a green cleridae land by Daisuke's side.

"I know that even without you telling me..... No matter what happens, I will continue to live on....."

She could hear the sound of something being torn off.

"Indeed, I promised her..... with *Fuyuhotaru*.....!"

The vines restraining Arisu was torn off in one motion.

".....!"

Freed from the vines, Arisu fell to the floor.

Lifting her head, she saw Daisuke pointing the handgun straight ahead. The cleridae fused with the handgun extended green feelers which stretched up his neck till his face, forming a green pattern. His other hand was grasping a large amount of vines ripped away by force.

The gigantic flower screamed again.

Vines began to assault Daisuke.

A thick branch slammed into the slender boy with a dull sound. His torn suit was flung into the air and the broken goggles was chucked to his back.

Even so, his hand holding the handgun pointed directly at the flower did not budge. Looking straight at Inori, the green pattern on his face shone.

Daisuke pulled the trigger.



A cannon-like blast that did not sound like it belonged to a handgun roared.

Above Inori's head, huge flower petals scattered everywhere.

The light in Inori's eyes faded.

The scattering flower emitted a final dying scream, before the vines covering the interior of the restaurant disappeared, dropping Inori's body down.

Daisuke kicked off the ground, reaching Inori's side in a flash and catching her.

"Hasegawa-san....."

Daisuke muttered.

A still silence descended upon the ravaged restaurant.

Amidst the collapsed customers, Daisuke embraced the girl motionlessly. Although no longer covered by the goggles, Arisu could not see his expression with his back facing her.

Inori laid limp in his arms, her head dropping to the side lifelessly.

There were no emotions all at in her eyes. Through her slightly open eyelid, only cloudy eyes looked back at Daisuke. Without will nor emotions, this was the outcome of a Mushitsuki who had turned into a Fallen.

The Fallen Inori would be taken away by the SEPB and accommodated in their isolation facility.

—Daisuke.....

Arisu bit back her words.

He mentioned that Inori resembled the girl named *Fuyuhotaru*.

The boy known as Kusuriya Daisuke seemed to have a deep connection to the girl whom he only knew by her codename. Arisu thought that that must have been unimaginably painful.

And she had even teased him with that back in the classroom.

"....."

It happened as she bit her lips.

Arisu felt a slight tremor under her.

A *pak pak* noise came from the ceiling and a powder-like substance poured down. Looking skywards, Arisu was flabbergasted.

The ceiling was collapsing due to the sudden disappearance of the vine. In the ceiling riddled with holes, large cracks appeared.

“Daisuke!”

Quickly turning to the boy, she found that he was still embracing Inori unresponsively.

Arisu grabbed the spear that was stabbed into the ground.

It wasn't just Daisuke. All the rest of the customers were unconscious. If the ceiling collapsed, there would be more than just one or two casualties.

“Before it collapses..... I've got to do this!”

Silver light spilled from the spear.

Three of the four wings combined to form a single blade. The spear started releasing an even greater amount of scales.

—The spear's power..... is increasing?

Just by holding it, Arisu could feel a surge of power coming from the spear. The outpouring of power felt even greater than any in the past, more so than when defeating Harimoto Jun's Mushi or when facing Daisuke at the Ferris wheel.

An especially big tremor shook the restaurant, causing the crack in the ceiling to widen.

When the chandelier broke off the ceiling with a *gakun*, Arisu stopped thinking.

Putting her entire strength into swinging the spear, the restaurant was bathed in silver light.



## Part 5

As per her usual routine, Arisu started her morning grouching about pain. However, the contents was slightly different today.

*“Muu, as expected, I’m not feeling up to it.....”*

Arisu groaned while walking down the corridor in her dougi.

She was completely out of it during this morning’s practice. Even when she was scolded by her instructor, she did not register the angry voice at all. She couldn’t even feel the cold air or floor as she walked.

*“To apologise or not, that’s the problem.....”*

There was a plaster on Arisu’s cheek. It was not a result of her morning practice. Last night, when she struck the ceiling with the spear, a piece of rubble had scraped her.

The destructive capability of the spear was immense, utterly breaching through the ceiling up till the ground above. She heard from Mihayashi later that even the boutique under construction above was wholly blown away such that no vestiges remained. Fortunately, casualties were kept to a minimum because it was a rest day when nobody was working.

The series of event was covered up as a gas explosion accident in the restaurant. The customers had lost consciousness due to ‘carbon monoxide poisoning’ from which they recovered promptly, and it was reported that most of the casualties only suffered slight injury despite the scale of the explosion.

*“Even though I did not know about it then..... but, how could the master lower her head in front of her servant.....”*

Arisu was heading towards Daisuke’s room.

All of a sudden, she stopped.

In the Ichinokuro main building, there was a well maintained garden in the courtyard. Arisu saw a figure by the side of the small pond.

It was Daisuke. He was staring at the pond absentmindedly in his sleepwear.

This was the first time that he woken up so early by himself. From his fatigued-looking side profile, he may not have slept a single wink last night.

“Even though he’s just Daisuke, I guess he also worries like a grownup sometimes.....”

After wavering for a while, Arisu decided to step into the garden.

Daisuke seemed to have heard Arisu’s footstep. He gave a fleeting look towards her before turning back wordlessly.

“What are you doing over here?”

“.....”

“Why don’t you say something, stupid Daisuke.”

Even with Arisu’s light banter, he did not respond.

A sombre silence descended between the two.

“.....It’s my bad, okay.”

Arisu muttered softly.

Daisuke turned around with a surprised look.

“For teasing you about the girl called *Fuyuhotaru*.”

Daisuke looked with disbelief at Arisu who was averting her gaze.

“I’m sorry.”

She apologised, this time looking into his eyes and saying it.

“.....”

Meeting her gaze for a while, Daisuke then turned his head the other way in embarrassment.

Seeing his awkward gestures, Arisu revealed a smile.

That’s right—.

A slight warmth spread in Arisu's heart.

It's alright even if she could only understand them a little by a little. About the Mushitsuki, about Mari..... and about Daisuke.

But—.

"If you were going to apologise, then don't involve me with this kind of stupid matters in the first place."

Daisuke said.

Arisu's smile froze over in a second.

"Don't involve me with some stupid matters like wearing a suit or attending mixers. You and I are just the observed and the observer, we're merely strangers. I can't stand taking part in your child's play."

Arisu was dumbfounded as Daisuke continued.

"Wha-....."

She could feel her face burning up.

Daisuke looked away in amazement, as if he was looking at an idiot.

"Stupid Arisu."

That was the last straw. Blood rushed up Arisu's head.

"W-w-what is with that attitude! Just what kind of life have you had that caused you to be so twisted? And to think that that was the first time I had apologised so sincerely too!"

"T-the first time you have apologised sincerely? That's my question, what kind of pampered life had you lived up till now!"

"That's enough, I understand now, it seems like you do not understand human words. Fine then, I'll make sure your body understands it! Take this, *Arisu dropkick~!*"

"Hey, wai-.....! This is not a game of charades—"

The boy's voice shattered the peacefulness of the early morning before disappearing into the sound of water splashing.

# Episode 04. The Hunter Who Entrusted her Dream

Beams of moonlight shining through the gaps in the clouds pierced through the darkness.

A silver light glistened over ten metres off the ground. The object which was reflecting the light of the full moon slowly descended onto the ground.

Like a piece of paper floating in the wind, the object descended in a disordered manner onto the roof of a new building.

“.....”

The silver-coloured object on *her* shoulders did not even budge. Concealing her breathing, she continued to observe the shadows moving on the ground.

The night in Akamaki City was polluted with neon lights and noise. In the distance, the cluster of lights belonged to the city centre. However, what the girl was interested in was between the gap of the multi-tenant buildings right below her.

*They* would definitely not head towards a bustling place, but only watch from afar. The girl knew that from all her experiences so far.

Sensing a gaze, the girl quickly turned around.

A pair of eyes appeared in the darkness. It belonged a black cat with a coat which seemed as if it was cut out of darkness. Its long tail with a kink at the end stood upright displaying its hostility, indicating to her not to come any closer.

The cat's ears flicked, and then it jumped away acrobatically, disappearing into the darkness.

[.....Regarding the explosion that occurred the other day, the Akamaki City Police Department has swiftly opened investigation, and requests any citizens

with relevant information to..... Also, they have refused to comment on a witness testimony that cited the appearance of Mushi.....]

A muzzled sound punctuated the quiet rooftop. The sound came from opposite the air-conditioning unit and water tank, approaching towards her.

[Regarding the matter, the Police Department has also firmly denied the existence of this widely disputed existence, citing the lack of any true evidence, also.....]

The light from a torchlight flashed. The circular spot of light wandered around the darkness before coming to a sudden stop.

“Is there somebody there?”

Perhaps he spotted a silver glint, as a nervous voice sounded out. A security guard with a wireless radio hanging off his belt appeared from the side of the water tank.

The beam from the torchlight illuminated the girl.

“.....!”

The man probably thought he was looking at a ghost.

She was dressed in jet-black tights, with hot pants and boots. On top of that, she wore a modified white coat with belts. In addition, a knitted hat covered the top of her eyes while a muffler hid the bottom half of her face. Supporting that body dressed in such an unreal fashion was a crutch.

What’s more, there was a butterfly sitting atop her shoulder which exuded light.

It was a glossy silver Morpho butterfly—resembling insect, excluding the fact that its wings did not lose its brilliance even when the full moon was blocked by the clouds.

“Wha-..... Who..... Who are you.....?”

The security guard barely managed to spit those words out.

The girl did not pay him any heed, only continuing to look downwards. All of a sudden, her gaze sharpened.

I found you—.

Under the muffler, the girl smiled.

Her sight was fixed on the shadows weaving around the dim back alley. There was more than one shadow. Behind a human-shaped shadow, a big mass was chasing after it.

Suddenly, her sight was distorted.

*“.....! Kuh.....”*

Losing strength in her knees, she lost her sense of balance.

There's..... no more time—.

Her body groaning, she lurched over.

*“Aah!”*

The security guard's gasp immediately became distant.

Her swaying body had fallen off the rooftop and was headed straight for the ground. She felt the sensation of floating for a moment before gravity took over, the wind assaulting her ears noisily.

If I just hit the floor like this, would I be released from it all.....?

Seeing the ground approach her as if in slow-motion, that thought went through her mind.

Perhaps it's not that bad to just disappear into the night like this.

Be it this life. Or this dream.

She would probably just disappear just like that, leaving behind nothing cleanly. It was not like there would be anyone who would mourn her disappearance anyway. In the first place, there were always no one around her—.

She grasped the crutch in her right hand.

Silver light spilled out from the girl falling to the ground.

The Morpho butterfly burst into a mass of feelers which wrapped around the girl. The feelers slid inside her clothing and fused with her body. Between the

gaps of the hat and muffler, a silver pattern could be seen on her cheeks.

The girl revelled in the moment when they fused. In that moment, her battered and spent body would be revitalised, and it felt like an unknown power overflowed from within her.

The Morpho butterfly's feelers also engulfed the crutch, morphing it into a silver spear taller than the girl itself and its four wings turning into blades.

".....!"

Sensing a presence above him, the person on the ground looked up.

His age was around that of the girl, in his early teens. He was a smart looking boy, unsuited to the darkness of the back alley in the middle of the night.

But the boy was not alone. Right at his back was a gigantic monster—running on its eight wriggling legs, it was a creature with a huge carapace. With long and thin folded wings, its outline resembles a longhorn beetle. As if attuned to the boy, the monster turned its head towards the sky.

Without sparing a look at the boy, the girl swung the spear at the monster.

"Wha—"

The boy's astonished gasp was drowned out by the sound of an explosion.

The spear was swung down with the momentum of the girl's fall. The impact fragmented the asphalt ground, scattering silver scales in all directions. The back alley was hit by the aftershocks, causing the glass windows on both sides to shatter successively.

"Uu..... aah.....!"

After the explosion died off, only the boy's cries of pain resounded in the back alley.

The girl's figure gradually appeared from within the cloud of dust. Facing the girl approaching him, the boy retreated backwards with a look of fear.

By the side of the boy clutching his chest in pain, the remains of half the body of the gigantic longhorn beetle was leaking bodily fluid. —Any damage inflicted on a Mushi would be reflected onto its host's psyche. The girl knew of this fact

more than anyone else.

“What are..... you.....? The same as me, a Mushitsuki.....?”

Having been attacked out of nowhere, the boy fell into panic. He groaned at the sight of the silver spear.

“.....”

The girl did not reply, instead she raised her spear. Seeing that, the boy’s face turned stiff.

“Stop—”

She swung the spear from down up, releasing a wave of silver scales. The wave passed by the side of the boy, engulfing the writhing Mushi.

“!”

The boy bent over backwards. Without even the time to look at the Mushi that had been blown away without a trace, he collapsed onto the ground on his knees. All signs of life disappeared from his face, and his eyes turned into glassy orbs that stared at the ground.

He was not dead. However, he did not seemed alive either. Looking down at him, the girl bit her lips.

“It’s not him either.....”

In the aftermath of the explosion, a siren could be heard. It seems that after the explosion incident the other day, the speed of response has been hastened.

The silver feelers separated from the girl’s body, coalescing into the shape of a Morpho butterfly again which rested on her shoulder.

“.....*Haah, haah*.....”

With the assimilation cancelled, the girl was hit by a wave of powerlessness.

Her breathing turned ragged and she had to support her staggering body with the crutch. She felt deep frustration at her weak body that could not even stand on its own.

There wasn’t any sense of guilt however.



Rather, looking down on the boy, a feeling similar to resentment seethed in her heart.

“Even living on in that state..... is a reason to rejoice, isn't it.”

Turning back with a flutter of her white coat, she left the area.

The howl of a cat could be heard coming from someplace.

# Part 1

*Mushi—.*

Infesting young boys and girls, they were a mysterious existence that feeds on the hopes and dreams of their host in order to grow.

They were labelled Mushi as such due to the fact that their external appearance resembled insects. Despite the government's official refutation of such existence, witness testimonies of sightings since ten years ago had cemented a deep fear in the hearts of the populace.

In exchange for feasting on the host's dream, the Mushi grants them inexplicable powers. The more the host uses the power of the Mushi, the more their dream is devoured, eventually leading to their death. Rarely, a Mushi which has completely consumed the dream of its host will mature, gaining its own will and going on a rampage. On the other hand, Mushitsuki whose Mushi were killed turns into a *Fallen*, an empty shell lacking will and emotions—.

To die from having their dreams completely consumed, or to become a Fallen from having their Mushi killed. With only the possibilities of these two endings, there remains no proof of the existence of Mushitsuki. Still, with the increase in sightings, the negative views towards Mushitsuki only proliferates one-sidedly.

*“Haah..... Haah.....”*

A light metal sound resounded in the dark room with a *kara*.

There was only one bed in Akamaki Central General Hospital room 3F300. A typical hospital room housed two to four patients, and only this room was special. In addition to the high-class bed and large screen television, there was also a large bookshelf brought in for *her*.

Entering the room through the window, she then unfused from the Morpho butterfly. To climb up into a room three storeys high with just the flesh body

would have been an impossible feat, no matter how athletic one was.

The crutch rolled on the floor with a *karan*.

Without even turning on the lights, she reached out for a glass bottle on the shelf next to the pillow. Taking out three tablets, she off-handedly swallowed them.

“*Haah.....*”

She could feel her heartbeat relaxing.

She removed her hat, muffler and other clothing roughly, tossing them into the closet. She then dressed herself in the hospital garb left on the bed instead.

Walking to the basin, she grabbed the cup and pitcher. Just as she was about to drink some water, she froze.

She saw her reflection in the mirror.

Her face in the mirror lit up by the faint moonlight was deathly pale. No matter how tired she was from *hunting*, the sharp look in her eyes did not look like it belonged to a thirteen years-old girl. Seeing the animosity reflected in her gaze, she thought of the hostile cat and the frightened security guard.

Averting her eyes from the mirror, she gulped down the contents of the cup in one go.

“Looks like it wasn’t the right one tonight either, Mari.”

The figure of a young man appeared in the mirror. He was seated in the visitor’s seat in front of the shelf. Just a moment ago, the seat had been empty.

“.....”

However, she—Hanashiro Mari, was not the least surprised.

The lanky young man was dressed in a doctor’s white coat. Under his unkempt hair, his calm eyes looked into Mari’s.

“Are you going to continue this? Akamaki City is the headquarters of a *certain organisation* after all. They would not remain silent about this.”

Ignoring the young man, Mari went straight to lie down on the bed.

“Besides, the Mushi of Elvioréne are innumerable..... please, just stop. Even if you manage to find the Mushitsuki of your objective—the *Undying* Mushitsuki, what would it even do for you?”

The young man’s tone was tinged with a trace of anger. No, it may have been sadness instead. Either way, Mari knew that his words were definitely heartfelt.

“Mari.....?”

The young man asked inquisitively. He must have realised that Mari was just laughing in silence.

It wouldn’t do a thing for me after all, that’s right—.

It was just as he said.

For someone like me who can’t even see through the continuation of my dream.....

On the verge of closing her eyelid, she saw the sorrow in his eyes.

Still smiling, Mari fell into slumber.

—The next morning.

“So you took these tablets again.”

It seems like she was in quite a deep sleep.

To Mari who had just woken up, the luminosity of the morning rays caused her to narrow her eyes. The discrepancy between her having just fallen asleep and the arrival of daybreak made her felt groggy.

Her attending doctor was by the side of the bed. He was holding the glass bottle which contained the tablets.

“Although this medicine will ease the pain by prohibiting the contraction of your blood vessel, it is not recommended to take so many—”

Mari rubbed her eyes and looked at the visitor’s seat.

Obviously, the young man from last night was not there.

“.....”

Looking at the Mari who was just staring out of the window mutely, the

middle-aged attending doctor gave a small sigh. From his attitude, one could tell the difficulty he had with handling Mari.

Mari had been admitted to this hospital for over one year. The reason for her stay was due to complications from a heart attack, a congenital heart problem she had since young. Since last autumn, she had rarely even left the hospital premises. Notwithstanding her primary school graduation ceremony, she also did not attend the entrance ceremony for the prestigious Horusu Seijou Academy at which she was due to enter.

Mari's family, the Hanashiro house was a head family with many followers in business and politics who practised flower arrangement. The VIP room which Mari was in depicted their prestige and tremendous financial wealth. As a matter of fact, with the Hanashiro house a major investor in the hospital, the attending doctor would not dare getting on Mari's bad side even by mistake.

Also, the main reason why he had so much trouble dealing with Mari was because she knew her own body's condition.

As a result of the assortment of drugs that she had to take, her organs were severely weakened. Furthermore, due to the hardening of her arteries, no one knew when her heart would just stop—.

“Preferably, you should reduce the use of this medicine so as to allow your body's immune system to recover. This way, you will also be able to discharge sooner. Let's work together to make that happen.”

With a smile, the attending doctor said in a placating tone. Even though his tone was somewhat awkward, he was truly concerned for Mari and was definitely not a bad doctor.

“.....”

However, Mari continued to stare out of the window wordlessly.

Sighing again, the attending doctor left the room saying, ‘I'll be back again in the afternoon.’

Once more, Mari's morning began with emptiness.

Boredom can kill a person—who was it who said that.

There was nothing ahead of the day for Mari, having repeated day after days. Her day was only punctuated by medication time and consultations, followed by lights out. Due to the need for her to be hospitalised to recuperate, she did not manage to make any friends in primary school. Furthermore, she had yet to even step foot into her middle school since she was enrolled. As such, there was not a single soul who would come to visit her. As for her parents, they were so busy socialising and managing their practice that they only showed their faces occasionally in the hospital.

Having lived this life for days, then months and now for a year, she could not imagine there being any change to this situation.

However, when was it that such unmoving, boring and empty days have changed?

“.....”

From the slightly ajar window, a pair of silver-coloured wing reflecting the morning sun approached.

It was the Morpho butterfly.

The one who granted Mari her Mushi—it was none other than the young man in the white coat who was seated next to Mari right now.

“Here’s a new book, Mari.”

Out of nowhere, the young man appeared with a smile holding a book out to Mari.

The sudden appearance of the young man was no longer a surprise to Mari.

“This is the original work of the latest popular drama. It’s fine to read something like this occasionally, isn’t it?”

Facing the young man with a mischievous smile on his face, Mari pondered.

—Why is it that he can still smile like that?

Mari first met the young man just a few months ago. —Despite the tedious, repetitive days, these past few months had passed very fast.

After meeting Mari and turning her into a Mushitsuki, he had also imparted to

her considerable knowledge about the Mushi.

Mari did not hate him for turning her into a Mushitsuki, for she knew that he had suffered as much as she did. Also, like Mari, he just lived waiting for the 'end' to come.

"Recently, there has been a surge in this kind of stories, these somewhat tragic love stories. However, there are still plenty of fun parts around....."

Ever since she met him, Mari's days have changed.

For Mari who had lived her life without a single purpose, she now had one thing to look forward to.

Night-time—.

Mari looked forward to the late night.

Night was when she had the freedom to run and jump around, to use her brimming strength to do whatever she wants. In addition to this freedom, she had an objective to fulfil at the same time.

"It's fine for today. ....Pass me that book."

Mari said, holding out her hand out of the window. The Morpho butterfly then rested on her pallid arm.

"That book again?"

With a bitter smile, the young man inserted the book into the bookshelf. In exchange, he took out a thin book.

It was a picture book titled, 'Potion of Magic'. Mari took the book from the young man and placed it by the pillow, turning to her sides.

"I'm going to sleep."

In preparation for night-time, Mari needed to preserve as much of her stamina as possible. Even if her body was strengthened from fusing with the Morpho butterfly, the energy to move still came from herself.

".....How is your research coming along?"

After lying on the bed for a while, Mari asked. Even though she could not sense his presence, Mari knew that the young man was still seated next to her.

“It was just finished the day before yesterday. Despite how I look, I’m a pretty outstanding apprentice, you know? Although I’ll be leaving this hospital where I met you..... whenever I have time, I’ll come by to see you.”

“Is that so.....”

Her voice sounded like it was coming from afar. Soon after, she felt her eyelids became heavy.

In the midst of a light sleep while waiting for night to approach, Mari’s consciousness drifted in the interstice between reality and dream.

The colourless landscapes of the past flowed past her mind before disappearing into nothingness.

—She had met the mysterious young man clad in a white coat during a summer day with clear skies.

With the reason that air-conditioning was poison to the body, the windows were fully opened, allowing the cries of cicadas to enter the room. That was when he appeared in front of Mari who was gazing at the fluttering curtains.

He wore a long white coat covering his entire body, something she thought did not suited him at that time. With a head of unkempt hair, one could not leave the impression of a student from him.

From the words of the attending doctor who brought him along, he was just a research resident fresh out of university, in other words, an apprentice. Mari thought that he had been brought along to act as a conversation partner for her, who led an uneventful life at the hospital. In actual fact, she knew that his role was to study Mari’s rare illness.

—Would you please tell me your name?

He should have already known her name from the patient chart, but what annoyed her even more was how his wording sounded as if he was speaking to a child.

—It’s Patricia.

Mari spitted out in displeasure.

What Mari depended on to stave off her boredom day after days was a large



collection of books. Patricia was the name of the heroine that appeared in the book 'Potion of Magic', a picture book translated from an overseas fairy tale.

The content of the story was as follows.

A witch visited Patricia who had fallen sick.

The witch offered her two kinds of potion; one made by an angel, and the other by a devil.

If she drank the angel's potion, in exchange for losing her loved one, her sickness would be cured and she would be able to live a long life.

On the other hand, her sickness would not be cured if she drank the devil's potion, but her loved one would *always* be by her side.

Even at her deathbed, Patricia was still undecided.

If she chose the angel's potion, everybody would lose their memories of her. And in return, she would live to a ripe old age, released from the fear of death.

However, if she drank the devil's potion—.

In the end, Patricia drank the devil's potion.

And so, she left the world. Even so, her loved ones would often visit her grave.

No matter how hard Mari thought, she could never figure out why did Patricia chose as such.

If she was Patricia, she would have chosen the angel's potion without hesitation. As long as her illness was cured, she would not have to face the fear of death creeping up on her.

Why did Patricia pick the devil's potion?

Not knowing the answer to this question, Mari read the picture book time after times—.

—Patricia.....?

The young man was surprised.

His reaction was obvious. She did not think that he had read the picture book

before, and he would not have expected that a young man who just recently graduated such as himself would be ridiculed by a girl much younger than him.

She saw the young man taking a peek at her bookshelf.

That was where she had kept the picture book.

—Do you understand Patricia's feeling?

He asked with a bitter smile.

At his unexpected words, Mari was speechless.

Till now, Mari still did not understand the true intent behind Patricia's choice.

—It's fine even if you don't know. Take your time to slowly look for the answer. That's because you are different from Patricia, you still have a long road ahead of you.

From that day on, the young man would visit Mari whenever he had some free time. He would visit even when there were deep shadows around his eyes, probably due to a lack of sleep from spending his time in research.

At first, she thought that he was visiting her out of a sense of mission as a doctor. It would not take long for a young resident to sympathise with Mari's situation.

He would talk about various things from his research to about books. At first, he would ramble on and on by himself. Eventually, Mari began to exchange a few words with him as well.

Be that as it may that a doctor's mission was to save their patients, Mari was perplexed over why did he cared so much for her.

However, before long, she knew the reason after hearing about his secret.

That was because of how he could see himself in her, similarly bound by the threads of destiny which they could never escape.

—Mari. What is your dream?

Being asked that question, Mari answered unwaveringly. She had already heard from him the consequence of answering that question.

—I want..... to live.

Biting her lips, Mari croaked out a voice that trailed off. That was the first time that she had revealed her tears in front of him. Also, that would be the first and the last time that he held Mari in his arms.

—Then, live on. Let us live on and see the continuation of the dream.....

And so, Mari became a Mushitsuki.

Then, he told Mari about various things.

About the Mushi. About the existences known as the *Original Three*. And also, about the Mushitsuki known as *Kusuriya Daisuke*.

—He is strong. Even as he hesitates, he knows that he must continue. Although I have never actually met him..... by all means, I want you to meet him.

Although the young man went out of his way to mention him, Mari had absolutely no interest in that person. She thought somewhere in her mind that she would never meet that person.

More so than him, Mari was interested in a certain Mushitsuki borne by Elvioréne—dubbed *Oogui* by a certain organisation, an existence that gave rise to Mushitsuki.

The Mushitsuki with the attribute of *Undeath*.

The existence of such Mushitsuki is closely intertwined with that of *Oogui's*. As such, they are someone that Mari must defeat eventually no matter what—.

“.....”

The outside of the window was that of darkness.

The bedside lamp lit up the last page of the ‘Potion of Magic’ propped up at the side of the bed.

Mari closed the picture book.

Looking at the wall clock, it was currently one o'clock deep in the night.

Mari got off the bed and opened the closet. She retrieved the white coat hidden at the back of the closet and swapped out of her hospital garb.

After covering her face with the knitted hat and muffler, she approached the

window which exposed the blackness of the night.

“Please stop this already, Mari.”

The young man’s voice came from her back.

At a corner of the seemingly empty room, a familiar young man in a white coat stood. As usual, there had been no sound of the door opening.

“Didn’t you promise me? To see the continuation of your dream together—”

“At the very least, I am aware of the condition of my body.”

Mari cut into the words of the young man.

“Please just let me do what I want in the end.”

“It’s not the end. You are still.....”

Mari ignored his words. When she opened the window, silver light entered the room.

The Morpho butterfly landed on Mari’s shoulder and transformed. Its feelers fused with her body as well as turning the crutch in her right hand into a silver spear.

She felt strength fill her entire body. But at the same time, she felt something at the depths of her heart being eroded.

“Also, didn’t you say so. That Mushitsuki..... if it’s me, then it might be possible to defeat that *Undying* Mushitsuki. Apart than me, who else could?”

She had spoken without her true intentions. The reason why Mari was searching for the *Undying* Mushitsuki was definitely not to defeat him.

The young man scarcely choked out some words.

“Even so, there is no reason for you to have to deal with it.....!”

“The one who gave me this strength was you. That’s why you have a responsibility to watch over me till the end.”

Without giving him an opportunity to reply, Mari jumped off the window from three storeys high unhesitatingly.

“Mari!”

Following the sound of slicing through the wind, Mari landed on both of her legs with a fierce impact. With her legs strengthened by the combination with her Mushi, she immediately broke into a run after her landing.

Running across the silent hospital premises, she jumped right over the fence.

Once again tonight, a silver bullet traced around Akamaki City under the moonlight.

## Part 2

As usual, Mari's morning began with emptiness again today.

"Your complexion does not look very good, you should get some more sleep."

The attending doctor mentioned, looking at the glass bottle on the shelf. Apart from his usual sigh upon noting that the number of tablets has decreased, he had nothing to add.

The sound of the door closing seemed to ring especially loud in the silent room.

"....."

Mari's chest-length hair fluttered in the wind blowing through the window.

Last night's *hunt* did not bore any fruit as well.

Unable to find the Mushitsuki of interest, she had just turned another Mushitsuki into a Fallen.

In the room devoid of people, the sound of Mari grinding her molars reverberated.

If his words are true, then he must be in Akamaki City..... yet why can't I find him!

Putting strength into her fingers, she dug into the sheets.

The answer had been apparent to her. Just the number of Mushitsuki alone are already much lesser than that of the residents of the city, and to find a specific person from within such a small group would be a nigh impossible task.

Mari's Morpho butterfly had the ability to sense other Mushitsuki. If not for that, it would have been impossible to search for Mushitsuki in the first place.

Despite this natural conclusion, Mari could not bear the frustration. Even though she had not expected it to be an easy task, the impasse caused her to be

extremely chagrined.

Mari sunk into the bed, covering her head with the blanket. Irritation and impatience shook throughout her body.

“Mari.”

A voice called out.

She was no longer surprised by now. The young man in the white coat appeared out of thin air seated on the visitor’s seat.

“Why don’t you at least take a break for tonight and not go out? At this rate —”

“There’s time no left!”

She bellowed unexpectedly loudly from under the sheet. She could hear the young man gasp.

That’s right. I do not have much longer.

The days of emptiness and boredom were coming to an end. Mari felt that clearly.

She shuddered heavily. It was different from the trembling due to irritation earlier. Unconcealable terror and unease ate into her, causing her to cling onto the sheet shivering.

“I can feel the strength slowly sapping away from my body! More so yesterday than the day before yesterday, more so today than yesterday.....! Surely tomorrow would only be worse! Just what is with this body! What is it so broken and tattered! Why is it only me.....!”

Mari’s words broke down into weeping.

I’m afraid.

Afraid of dying.

I fear that I’ll just disappear like that without leaving anything behind, without anyone knowing and without anyone remembering me.

Like that, it’s as if I did not exist in the first place—.

The thoughts that went through her mind caused chills to run down her back.

I don't want that..... I'm right here. Hanashiro Mari is right here.

The more she thought, the more she could feel the despair creeping up on her.

I'm right here..... in this small room where no one comes, no one knows about.....

Those words did not come out. The anger which has transformed into fear causing her to shudder now turned into sadness. Under the blanket where light does not reach, only Mari's sobbing sounds leaked.

I want to become Patricia..... I don't want to die yet.....

If Mari was the protagonist of the fairy tale, she would have chosen the angel's potion.

It was not like she had anyone precious anyway. There were also no one who cherished her as well. If so, wouldn't it at least be fair for her to be freed from the fear and unease of death? Despite there being so many people who were enjoying their life unknowing of her suffering outside the windows from which she could see—.

“.....Someone give me the angel's potion..... please.....”

Mari pleaded hoarsely.

“.....”

The young man did not say anything. She could easily imagine him gnashing his teeth in exasperation at his own lack of power. But, just that would not bring any salvation to Mari at all.

“Hey..... please.....”

Mari's groans reverberated in the empty room.

—While in the midst of crying, Mari fell into slumber.

She awoke to the light knocking on the door.

“.....”



Mari lifted her blanket and raised her upper body.

It was probably just a consultation by the attending doctor, she thought. Usually he would just enter without making any noise. She made sure that there were no more traces of tears on her cheeks and confirmed that the young man was not around.

After crying out loud when she had felt like crying, she felt much more at peace now.

No, she could still only feel a void in her chest.

—In the end, what would happen will eventually happen. That's all.

Narrowing her eyes, she gazed at the scenery beyond the window. The figures of the birds soaring through the sky appear faded through her eyes.

As she waited, she heard another knock.

“.....?”

Mari creased her eyebrows. If it was as usual, the attending doctor would have just entered without waiting for Mari's permission.

Then, she could hear someone muttering from behind the door.

“Maybe she's sleeping..... if so, I'd feel bad to wake her up just because I came. After all, first impressions are the most important..... no no, it's not like I'm here for a matchmaking or anything.....”

Mari raised her eyebrows even more.

What.....? What is outside the door?

“It can't be, could she have collapsed..... no no no, that can't be..... but, but, in the off chance that that's so then I can't be waiting here!”

Thinking that the voice started to turn urgent, all of a sudden, the door opened violently with a *paan*.

“.....”

Mari stared at the rare visitor in amazement.

“.....”

Still holding onto the door handle, the visitor gawked back at Mari.

“.....”

With the two staring at each other, an awkward silence descended between them.

.....Who.....?

Mari’s mind was filled with many question marks. But, they were all blown away right after.

“.....Hello!”

As if trying to hide her eccentric behaviour, the girl exclaimed with a large smile on her face.

Mari could only stare back at that unblemished smile without making a word in return.

That was the first meeting between Mari and that girl, Ichinokuro Arisu.

“Erm.....”

That was all Mari could squeeze out. She could not even comprehend what was happening at the moment.

I think you got the wrong room—.

Before Mari could say that, the girl just entered the room without her approval. Carrying a bouquet of flowers, she looked around the room curiously before walking briskly to the basin.

“I thought that you might have collapsed so I just entered thoughtlessly, but I’m glad to see that you seem to be in good health. I did wanted to get something other than flowers, but a fruit basket seemed to be too commonplace so I decided not to. So, please tell me your request today, then you can look forward to it the next time. I’ll leave these flowers here, okay. In any case, that sure is a peculiar flower vase.”

“.....”

She moved around while talking to her heart’s content, not minding Mari who was too stunned to do anything.

Whether it was the fact that Mari was currently hospitalised as she was not in good health, or that the 'vase' wasn't a vase but a water pitcher, the girl's overwhelming presence brilliantly swept them all aside. Even the fact that the way she arranged the flower made it look like an unspeakable horror to Mari who practised flower arrangement since young did not seem to register in her.

With nimble and lively movements, her healthy and youthful looks was dazzling. Her long glossy hair extended beyond her neck, looking as smooth as silk. Her stature was smaller than that of Mari and she wore the uniform of a certain school.

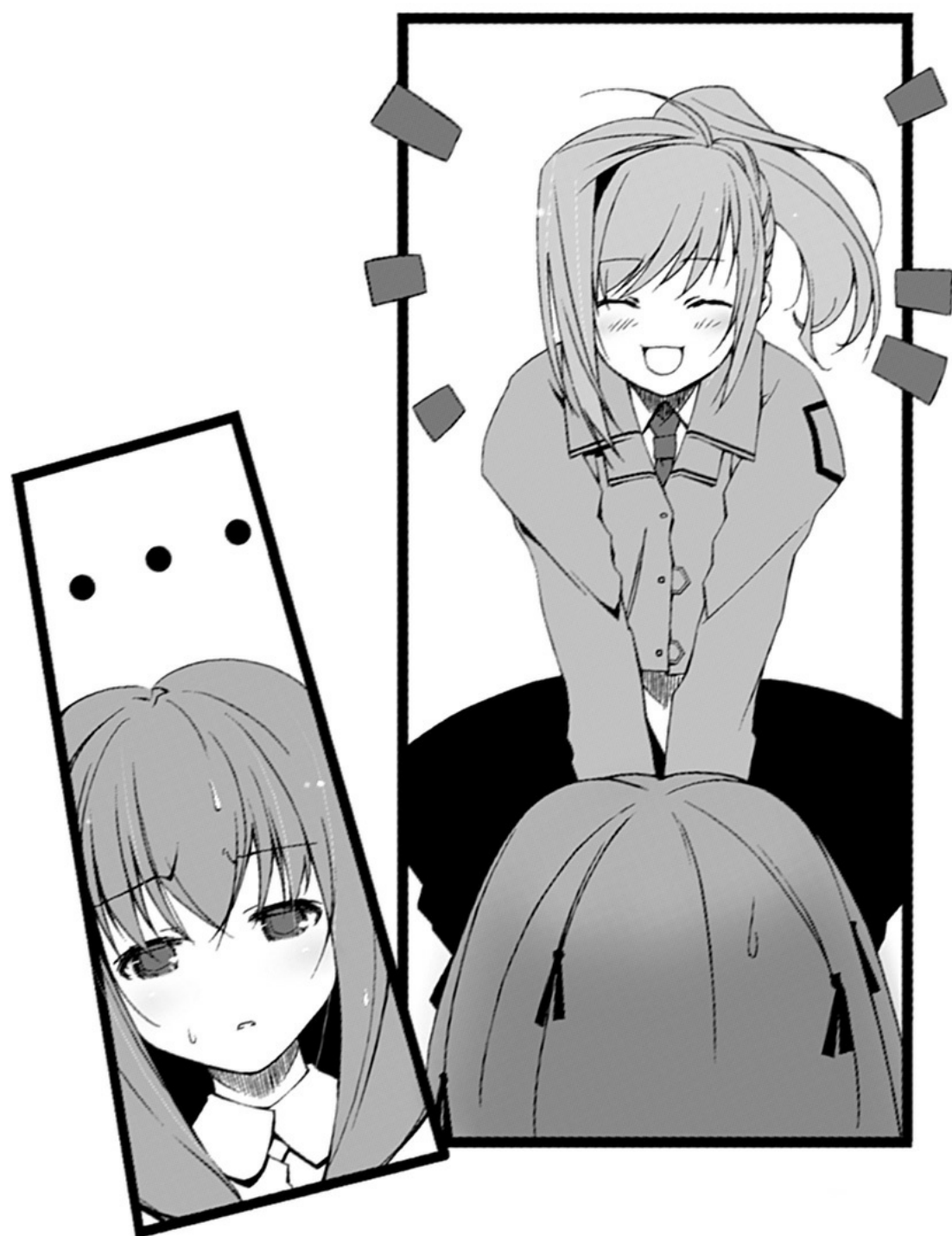
"Erm.....?"

Mari began to feel slight annoyance at this girl who was walking around the room as if it was her own, ignoring the owner of the room. Creasing her eyebrows, she repeated in a stronger tone.

Finally, the girl released a breath of relief as though she had completed her work. She then sat down the visitor's seat without permission and faced Mari with a smile.

Her worriless smile and big eyes seemed to suck the dejection out of Mari.

"Nice to meet you, Hanashiro Mari-san."



Mari widened her eyes. It seems like she had not entered the room mistakenly.

“I am Ichinokuro Arisu. Your classmate, the first seat number among the girls.”

At those words, Mari remembered.

The uniform worn by the girl called Arisu was none other than that of Horusu Seijou Academy Middle School. The uniform that Mari had not had a single chance to put on ever since enrolling.

At her sudden self-introduction, Mari was flustered.

“Ichinokuro..... Arisu?”

Mari repeated the name of the girl. Even so, she did not recall that name. After all, she had not attended school for even a day.

Mari swept aside the hair coverings her eyes with her finger. She glanced at her knees as though to avert from Arisu’s gaze.

Why did she..... come here? We have never even met before, right.....?

It had been a long time since she met someone of her age, as well as to speak face-to-face like this. Mari realised that she found it hard to deal with such unfamiliar visitor.

“I’m sorry. I don’t even know the names and looks of my classmates.....”

In contrast to Mari’s disappearing voice, Arisu was smiling happily.

“I know. That’s why, nice to meet you.”

Arisu grasped Mari’s restless hand with both of her hands, causing Mari to jerked back her shoulders in surprise.

“.....”

Mari glanced at Arisu’s face timidly and she looked back with a grin.

There was no way Mari could win against her. Giving in with a smile, Mari muttered in a soft voice.

“.....Nice to meet you too.”

Arisu beamed when she heard that. Just slightly, she looked relieved.

According to Arisu, she had always been concerned about Mari who had not turned up even once since school started. She was curious about just what kind of person was Mari, who had not appeared even after two semesters.

“But, why did you come all of a sudden.....?”

In response to her question, Arisu was hesitant for the first time.

“That is..... there was a transfer student.”

“Transfer student?”

“And then, it was decided that the student would use your desk.”

Mari widened her eyes. She seemed to hear something in her heart crack.

She smiled sadly.

No one knew of my existence..... No one even remembers me.

The scene materialised in her mind. A long vacant seat being occupied by somebody else, returning the classroom to a state where students chat happily—that is indubitably the scene of the original classroom where Mari did not exist.

It is as if I did not belong anywhere from the very beginning—.

Her hands gripping the sheets trembled.

“But, don’t worry! After I strongly protested to the teacher, they agreed to provide a new set of desk and seat for that student!”

Arisu said forcefully.

Mari raised her head in astonishment.

“Eh.....?”

“After all, it’s weird if you think about it. Even if you were missing for a while, you are still one of our classmates. To take away one of our classmate’s seat like that, that I absolutely cannot agree with!”

“.....”

Raw emotions rised up from Mari’s chest, dyeing her vision completely white.

She was one of their classmates—Arisu had stated that unquestionably.

Arisu prattled on passionately along with some hand gestures, not seeming to notice Mari who was struck speechless. She spoke about how she had argued with the teacher, as well as the voices of the other students who agreed with her. And how she then thought of coming to visit her, along with her indecisiveness when it came to choosing the flowers to her internal conflict on whether to open the door or not. She also shared how she had rehearsed repeatedly in her heart so as to not appear rude when meeting her for the first time.

Mari was so overwhelmed by Arisu that from the start till the end, she could only answer with either ‘yes’ or ‘is that so.....’.

Their strange one-sided conversation continued until the nurse came in to inform Arisu that visitation hours were over.

“Is it okay if I come tomorrow too?”

Standing up from the chair, Arisu enquired forthrightly.

“Eh.....”

Mari was confused and could only hem and haw. To this question which she had heard for the first time, she could not think of how to answer her.

“You..... don’t have to come if you’re not free.....”

She answered unconsciously in a soft voice. Irritation and an unfamiliar peculiar feeling rocked her heart.

Anyway, she only came here out of politeness—.

Mari placed her hands on her chest, trying to suppress her conflicting emotions. Arisu looked on curiously.

“Why? There’s no problem on my side. If so, then see you tomorrow.”

Leaving those words, Arisu left.

In her place, the attending doctor arrived. After the usual consultation, he left with a ‘good night’.

As the time for lights out came, the room was wrapped in darkness.

However, Mari was not in the mood to sleep.

Just what is that girl.....?

Even after Arisu had left and even during the consultation, Mari was in a state of slight panic.

Visiting from out of nowhere and then saying whatever she wants. Mari could not understand in the least what were Arisu's true intentions or objective. Why would she come to visit someone whom she had never met ever before? Why did she spoke with her so familiarly?

"Ichinokuro..... Arisu."

Without realising it, she said the name of that girl out loud.

"Looks like someone came to visit you."

".....!"

From who knows when, the young man in white coat was sitting on the visitor's seat. Although already used to his sudden appearance, his abrupt arrival caused Mari who was deep in thought to stiffen.

"Aren't you glad, Mari."

The young man gave her a smile.

Mari could feel her cheeks heating up. Turning to the other side of the bed, she averted from his gaze.

"There's nothing to be glad about.....!"

"Why not? Aren't you happy?"

"Happy? .....That's obviously not the case."

Saying so, Mari realised the reason for the irritation that half-filled her heart.

"I was portraying to her a side of me that looks fine.....! In any case, it's not like that girl came here to visit me for anything other than pity!"

Her face twisting, Mari said harshly.

In her eyes, the figure of Arisu was very dazzling.

But on the other hand, Mari was certain that in the eyes of Arisu, she was



only a target of pity. She was pained by anger and frustration when she thought about things like that.

If only I was like that girl—.

Mari could feel somebody whispering in her heart. But, she did not want to admit that that was just her true feelings, as doing so only made her felt more mortified.

“I’m sure all she felt was pity..... seeing someone like me, an unfortunate classmate.....”

Spitting out those words, she bit her lips.

Did Arisu only felt pity towards her?

Those large black eyes. Did they even see Mari with such gaze of pity even once?

The more Mari questioned herself, the more irritated she felt about herself who can’t help but think pessimistically.

“Wouldn’t it be great if she came back again.”

“Not like she would come again—”

Retorting reflexively, she was suddenly struck by a coughing fit.

She quickly raised her body, reaching for the water pitcher. But, right before she grasped it, her hands stopped.

“*Kh.....*”

“I guess you can’t drink it like this.”

The young man burst into laughter.

The water pitcher was stuffed with flowers that were in disarray, with no thoughts to balance or colours.

Her face blushed red, Mari curled up on the bed.

Even as the night grew deeper, Mari was yet to be struck by sleepiness. In her mind, her conversation with Arisu repeated vividly, winding back to the start whenever it ended.

Still one of our classmates—.

“That’s right, I still have a place of belonging…… right here……”

Mari muttered repeatedly till the early morning, when her consciousness was transported to the land of dreams.

By the time she woke up, the sun was already high up in the sky.

The midday sun’s ray blew away her sleepiness at once.

“As it looked like you were having a good sleep, the morning check-up has been skipped.”

The attending doctor who accompanied the nurse serving lunch said so with a smile. He was looking at the glass bottle on the shelf, which contents had not decreased since yesterday.

“……”

As time passed, Mari could feel her temper rising. Having used up more energy thinking about needless things, she managed to finish up her lunch cleanly despite not being able to finish even half usually.

It was now afternoon.

The young man in a white coat appeared out of nowhere as usual next to Mari who was reading the ‘Potion of Magic’.

“Your complexion looks better today.”

“What do you mean by better, there’s no such thing. Thanks to a certain somebody, I even forgot to go out last night. Even though I don’t even have a single day to waste……”

“I wonder if that somebody would come today?”

The hand turning the page came to abrupt stop. In the first place, Mari’s head was in the clouds and she could not absorb the contents of the book.

In fact, that was all Mari had been thinking about. She already knew that it was futile to expect anything, and that the more she looked forward to it, the more disappointed she would feel when she did not come. In that case, it would be for the best if she did not expect her to come in the first place.

“Didn’t I already say that she would not come? Yesterday’s visit would have been more than enough to satisfy her. By now, she have probably already forgotten cleanly about me.”

“Is that so?”

“How many times do you want me to say it.”

For a while, Mari and the young man’s squabble continued.

She’s here.

Unaware of the internal struggles in Mari’s heart, she appeared right on time as if it was completely natural.

A knock came from the door.

The figure of the young man immediately disappeared, leaving behind only Mari alone.

Another knock rang out to the stiffened Mari. And then, a voice came from beyond the door.

“.....Maybe she’s still sleeping..... It wouldn’t do for me to wake her up. But, but, what if.....”

If this continues, the door would be flung open violently again in repetition of yesterday.

I wonder if she’s trying to repeat this routine everyday—.

Mari thought while watching the door in a daze.

Everyday—.

As Mari closed the picture book,, the various dissonances in her heart vanished as though they were just illusions.

As she watched on, the door sprang open explosively.

“Good afternoon.”

Mari greeted Arisu who burst into the room with a smile.

She looked surprised for a moment, but immediately returned a smile.

“Good afternoon!”

## Part 3

Taking a seat on the chair, Arisu began with, 'I failed'.

"I completely forgot about taking your request yesterday. Do you have anything you want? I'll definitely bring it along tomorrow."

At the sudden mention of tomorrow, Mari was stumped.

"T-there's nothing in particular....."

"Is that so? Well, it's fine then. Just tell me whenever you have thought of something."

"I-Ichinokuro-san....."

"Arisu."

"Eh?"

"Saying Ichinokuro-san each time is a mouthful, isn't it? So, you can just call me Arisu. I'll call you by your last name too, okay, Mari?"

Mari alternated her gaze between Arisu's face and her hands placed on top of her knees, while Arisu looked straight at her. Her unwavering gaze caused Mari to turn away to avoid meeting her eye.

"Arisu..... Is it okay for you to be here?"

"It's okay?"

"Don't you have other things....."

"Aah, it's fine since I'm pretty leisurely after school. My friends all have their own club activities, so I don't have anyone else to hang out with anyway. There's nothing to do even if I went home too."

Arisu said as she changed the water in the pitcher. Mari wondered when would she finally notice that the pitcher was not a flower vase.

In response to Mari's further questions, Arisu explained why she did not join any clubs.

Arisu described how due to an old custom that had continued from the olden time in her family, she underwent strict martial arts training every morning. Being very much fed up with that already, there was no way she would want to participate in additional strenuous exercises after school. Furthermore, she did not join any cultural arts club as she couldn't stand being trapped in a room for anything.

"If Mari could come to school, what club would you join?"

At Arisu's question, Mari fell silent.

Mari's condition was so severe that she did not even know when could she attend school. She could not imagine how it would be like to spend time in school.

"I see you have lots of books. Since you like to read, how about the Reading club?"

Arisu approached the bookshelf. She took out the book, 'Potion of Magic', and started flipping through the pages.

All those books were just there for Mari to dispel her boredom. It was not that she particularly liked reading.

"I would love to be able to go outside every day. Whether it's a picnic, or a trip..... anyway, I just want to go somewhere far."

She spoke out subconsciously.

Mari imagined in her mind.

She envisioned herself attending Horusu Seijou Academy, showing up for lessons and moving her body during physical education. To chat with friends after school and try her best during club activities. She wasn't like Arisu, but she wouldn't want to camp inside a cultural arts club either. She already had more than enough of being stuck in a room.

Arisu looked at Mari in blankness before revealing a cheery smile.

"Mari's kind of strange."

Those words had a momentous impact for Mari.

Str-..... strange? Me?

“There’s no way clubs such as picnic club or travelling club exist.”

Arisu finished with a smile, unwittingly causing Mari to be annoyed.

Although Mari acknowledged that her preference may be different from others, she was still vexed to have Arisu point that out.

“Who..... who are you to say, you’re the strange one.”

Mari fired back timid but barbed words.

This time, it was Arisu’s turn to be shocked. She leaned her body forward over the bed.

“What, seriously? I’m strange? What are you referring to? Let me tell you first, my height is clearly within the standard region, probably.”

Mari had been referring to how she had used the water pitcher as a vase, or how she always opened the door violently after having hastily come into her own conclusion, and how she generally did things at her own pace. It seems that the person herself had not realised that.

Arisu’s self-defense continued all the way till the end of visitation hours. Her main defense being that her classmates were way weirder than herself. Mari could only interject intermittently as she listened to Arisu, but all she learnt from her words was that there was no one with as strong a personality as Arisu.

“You look much better today than yesterday, I’m quite relieved.....”

Before Arisu left, she said so.

This surprised Mari, causing her chest to tighten. She unconsciously forced a smile to hide her shock.

“My condition..... have its ups and downs.....”

“You know what my friends said? They said that if someone like me came to visit, that might even cause your condition to worsen. Or so they say.”

Mari lifted her face.

*“Tahaha,* even though I know that was just a joke. But because of this personality, I was often told that I do not notice other people’s feelings. Perhaps I’m just being a bother.”

“T-that’s not.....!”

Mari denied her reflexively. Seeing her flustered reaction, Arisu knew that she was just trying to console her.

“I’m glad. Well then, see you tomorrow.”

Waving her hands with a smile on her face, Arisu left the room.

See you tomorrow—.

Arisu’s last words echoed in Mari’s mind.

“.....”

Mari stared at the door as it came to a stop.

Left alone in the quiet hospital room, the time she spent with Arisu just moments ago felt like it was just an illusion. The current state of the room in which only the sound of her breaths could be heard was the one she had been accustomed to.

It was time for the attending doctor to visit. Mari accepted the pre-sleep consultation as usual.

“Looks like you managed to make a friend.”

At the words of the middle-aged doctor, Mari was reminded that Arisu’s visit was not just an illusion.

After the attending doctor left, it was time for her to rest.

“.....”

In the room where light slowly vanished, Mari stared at the ceiling while lying on the bed.

When the needle of the clock pointed to one o'clock, Mari descended from the bed. She couldn’t remember exactly what had she been thinking about the whole time.

She opened the closet and changed into the clothes she wore when *hunting*.

“Are you going again?”

The voice sounded right as Mari was about to descend from the window.

Turning around, she saw the young man in white coat standing in a corner.

“Shouldn’t you take a good rest and let your body recover? If you collapsed, the girl who visits you will be worried.”

“.....That doesn’t matter.”

The Morpho butterfly that appeared about the window merged with Mari. A silver pattern ran across her cheeks peeking through the hat and muffler. The gleaming spear lighted up Mari’s side profile.

“After all—”

She would stop coming once she was bored.

Those words remained stuck in her throat.

Why couldn’t she just honestly express her happiness? Wasn’t it her wish to be rid of loneliness?

Or could it be that she had been alone for such a long time that she had forgotten what it felt like to have someone around?

“.....”

Biting back her lips, she turned away from the young man. Placing her hands on the window, she unhesitatingly leapt off.

The sound of the wind assaulted her ears. Bounded by gravity, she began to fall towards the ground.

She somehow absorbed the force of the landing with her enhanced legs, immediately breaking into a sprint across the hospital premises.

Jumping over the fence, she aimed for an alley far from human gaze and dashed inside.

Running through the night, she left her unnecessary thoughts in the wind.

Truthfully, the reason why Mari left the hospital room was to blow away her



feelings of restlessness. But now that she was running about, she remembered her original goal.

I'll find it tonight for sure..... the *Undying* Mushitsuki.....!

By thinking her objective out loud for herself, she finally drove away the thoughts about Ichinokuro Arisu.

I don't have time to think about her..... because there's something that I must do no matter what!

She gripped the spear tighter.

The moonlight did not shine through tonight. Avoiding the main walkway, Mari eyed one of the multi-tenant building. Taking a big jump, she kicked off a rain gutter, caught onto the fence and did a somersault to arrive on the rooftop.

She spied the surroundings cautiously.

There was no sign of anybody. However, there was a prior visitor.

"So, we meet again."

The black cat with a kinked tail puffed up its fur upon seeing Mari. Its characteristic tail indicated to Mari that it was the cat she saw on a different building the other day.

"Just how many homes do you have.....?"

Mari quietly questioned the cat. But, the black cat only expressed its enmity before promptly running away. That made her feel a bit lonely, and also somewhat guilty for rousing it from its slumber.

"....."

The Morpho butterfly separated from Mari as she saw the cat off. As a sense of lethargy immediately hit her, she sat down on the rooftop.

All I have to do now is to wait.

Hugging her knees, Mari waited motionlessly. As she sat there doing nothing, her thoughts naturally drifted to that of Arisu.

I see—.

Mari realised the reason for her confusion in her heart.

There had been no reason to the whole time.....

Up till now, Mari had always been all alone; she had never been as close with anyone else as she had with Arisu before. As the first experience of her lifetime, she had no idea about what to do or how to feel. In a certain sense, it was only to be expected that she would feel confused.

Burying her face in her knees, she thought to herself tranquilly.

What should I do from now onwards.....

This was the first time that she had imagined a future apart from that of death. She wondered if Arisu would still come to visit her in that room? And if she did, how should she receive her?

Maybe someday, like that girl, I would be able to attend..... to go to school together with her.....

*Tokun, tokun*..... she could hear the sound of her own heartbeat.

Perhaps due to her not having caught a wink of sleep during the daytime, Mari felt herself being pulled into the chasm between dreamscape and reality.

“!”

The Morpho butterfly dancing in the night sky shone more intensely. Leaving silver aftertrails in the air, it danced around restlessly.

It's here.....!

Swiftly raising her head, she supported herself with the crutch.

“It seems like there's a big catch tonight.....”

Looking down on the ground, Mari saw a group of three youths walking down the back alley. She could see that they were walking while being vigilant about their surroundings. Straining her eyes, she could see small insects hovering about them as well.

Mari fused with the Morpho butterfly. The shining spear conveyed to her the fact that those insects were more than they what seemed.

“One-versus-three, this'll be the first time.”

A silver pattern running across her face, Mari grinned.

Her Morpho butterfly was endowed with a sensor that can detect other Mushi. With this ability, Mari only had to wait for Mushitsuki to enter her *net*, such was her method of *hunting*.

She leapt off the rooftop.

“.....!”

Sensing some movement, the three youths looked up.

That look of surprise on your faces, I’m already tired of looking at it—.

Mari brandished the spear coolly.

Let’s find out again..... whether you guys are the *Undying* Mushitsuki or not!

It was the usual surprise attack, begetting the usual reaction. Except—.

“I-it appeared.....!”

“Let Rina and the rest know.....!”

“No, let’s defeat her here—”

Mari hesitated to swing her spear down for a second.

The response by the three youths felt different from the rest she had met. Three Mushi expanded in size and moved in to surround her.

A sharp gaze examined the three from within the muffler. In return, the youths watched for her movements anxiously. Among them, one was so gripped by fear that his body had completely stiffened up.

The three of them are Elvioréne’s Mushitsuki..... but, these people—they said they were waiting for me?

Although they were surprised at Mari’s appearance, they did not fall into panic. It was obvious that they were expecting Mari to be hostile towards them.

“Are you guys from..... the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau?”

Mari spoke her thoughts in a low voice.

“That voice..... a girl?”

“You say we’re the SEPB?”

“Don’t lump us with those assholes!”

Shouting in anger, one of the Mushi reached out to attack Mari.

Apparently, they did not belong to them.

The Special Environmental Preservation Bureau.

According to the young man in white coat, it was a government agency which employs Mushitsuki to capture other Mushitsuki. To the best of her knowledge, there was no other organisation that was composed of Mushitsuki.

Mari deftly shook off the attack with her spear.

The silver scales released by the spear bisect the attacking Mushi. The resulting shockwave that swept past destroyed the surrounding walls of the building.

“Wha-.....”

Witnessing the overwhelming difference in strength, the youths’ face paled. One of them, the owner of the Mushi which was just killed, collapsed with a look of agony on his face.

Looks like it’s not him either—.

Sparing a side glance at the fallen youth, Mari sighed in disappointment.

It did not matter to Mari at all who these youths were. There was only one thing left for her to confirm, that was whether or not one of them was the Mushitsuki of her objective.

“U.....waaaa!”

“Damn it!”

Of the two left, one chose to attack. The remaining person having lost all his fighting spirit, turned his back towards Mari and ran away.

A gigantic Mushi swiped its claws at Mari. However, the huge claws which were almost as thick as an adult’s body was stopped by the shaft of Mari’s spear.

“Fuu!”

From that position, Mari swung the other end of the spear up below the Mushi. With the sound of something cracking, the huge body of the Mushi was blasted into the air.

Making a revolution with the spear, she thrust the spear at the Mushi floating in the air.

Silver light enveloped the space.

The Mushi exploded into multiple pieces.

*“Gah.....!”*

Revealing the whites of his eye, the youth crumbled on the ground.

It's not him either.....!

Mari directed her sharp gaze at the remaining youth who was escaping. Stomping off the ground, Mari chased the youth with incredible speed.

*“Hii.....!”*

When he turned around, the youth let out a shriek. In a bid to protect its owner, the Mushi stood in her way and opened its huge mouthpiece to bite her.

Mari leapt off the ground, avoiding the attack. Kicking off the wall of the building with superhuman strength, she struck the side of the Mushi's head with her spear.

*“Uwaaa!”*

It seems that the Mushi managed a frantic dodge. Although having avoided a direct hit, half of the Mushi's body was blown away by the silver scales.

*“Sto—”*

The youth who had tumbled to the ground held his head with his hands and curled up. His Mushi having narrowly avoided death, he also barely escaped being turned into a Fallen.

*“Stop..... don't kill my Mushi..... please.....”*

Mari stopped in front of the youth. Taking a closer look, she found that the boy was even younger than her. He looked like he was barely a primary school student.

Mari swung the spear towards the Mushi which was still squirming.

But, at that moment.

—See you tomorrow.

Like a flash, Arisu's smile crossed her mind.

“.....!”

The spear stopped at the last second.

Why is that girl coming into my mind at a timing this.....!

She looked at the boy on the ground in bewilderment.

“I don't want to..... forget everything..... save me.....”

Looking at his shivering figure, a single thought boiled over in Mari's heart.

This boy too..... may have promised to meet somebody tomorrow for all I know—.

She widened her eyes.

The strong feelings spouting from her chest shocked her more than anyone else. She had never felt this way before.

“Ah.....?”

Still holding up her spear, she turned around to look behind her. Apart from the scars of carnage, there were the figures of two youths collapsed on the ground.

I..... what have I been doing till now.....?

The hand holding on to the silver spear trembled lightly.

In the search for the *Undying* Mushitsuki.....

With her free left hand, she covered her face in a daze.

The trembling gradually grew stronger.

Mari had only intended to find the Mushitsuki of her objective. No matter how many she had turned into Fallen, she thought that they were still more well-off than herself as they were still alive. She thought that compared to the

constant fear of dying she underwent, losing their emotions was merely a trivial matter.

However.

You are still one of our classmates—.

See you tomorrow—.

She recalled the conversations she had with Arisu.

I was wrong.....? All their future..... their dreams..... I was the one who snatched it all away.....?

*“Aah..... aah.....”*

Mari’s whole body shuddered.

She finally realised what was it that she had done. At the same time, a bottomless despair befell her.

All those people..... like me..... they had a future they were looking forward to.....?

*“Aaah.....”*

The groan leaking out of her mouth was covered by her left hand.

She did not even finish off the Mushi as she turned onto her back and ran away frantically.

I was the one..... who deprived everything from them.....?

Having turned a blind eye from all matters unrelated to herself, she had never realised the true consequences behind her actions.

The people who were turned into Fallen by Mari, if they had made a promise to meet the next day..... what would happen to those who were waiting for their return?

The figure that came into her mind was, herself.

In a room where nobody ever comes, she saw the figure of herself as she waits amidst the emptiness and loneliness.

*“Haah..... haah.....!”*

Her heartbeat accelerated further and she felt like she could not breathe. Although she had never experienced a seizure when she was fused with the Morpho butterfly, Mari could feel her body screaming.

*“Haah! Haah!”*

She ran all the way back to the hospital as if trying to escape. Jumping through the open window on the third floor, she entered her room.

The Morpho butterfly unfused from Mari as if it was being ousted by her.

“Mari.....?”

As usual, the young man in white coat was waiting for Mari’s return.

Without catching her breath, Mari reached out for the glass bottle on the shelf.

“Mari!”

The young man’s expression changed. Mari spilled countless tablets on her palm and swallowed them in one go. However, her heart palpitation would not slow.

“What are you doing.....! That medicine.....!”

Mari roughly shook off the hand which the young man placed on her shoulder. Not minding his presence, she took off the white coat and wrapped herself in the hospital garb.

“What in the world happened, Mari!”

Not even bearing heed to the young man, Mari dived into the bed. She threw the blanket over her head and stared into darkness. Even so, her heartbeat and the trembling of her body did not seem to settle down.

I..... was the cause of many people’s loneliness.....

Hugging her body, Mari’s quivering persisted throughout the night.



## Part 4

“.....”

In the hospital room suffused with the morning rays, Mari was gazing out of the window in a stupor.

She had not managed to sleep for even a second.

Although her body felt weak, her mental condition was in even greater disarray. Her thoughts were paralysed and she could not even think about anything at all.



As the time for morning consultation approached, the attending doctor came into the room. He may have seen the extreme drop in number of tablets in the glass bottle, causing him to have a look of startle on his face.

“I tried to pour one out, but many more spilled out..... I threw away those which fell onto the ground.”

Still looking out of the window, Mari spoke lifelessly like a doll, only moving her mouth.

Although the attending doctor was further surprised when Mari spoke, he did not probe further. However, he did draw some blood which had never happened before.

After the attending doctor left, she felt a presence inside the devoid room.

“Why.....”

Mari uttered.

“Why didn’t you stop me.....? You already knew the consequence of what I did, didn’t you.....?”

At Mari’s questions, the young man in white coat did not answer.

He had tried repeatedly to stop her.

He had always attempted to dissuade Mari from going out on her *hunt*. It was just that Mari had never lent an ear to him.

In the solemn room, time flowed ceaselessly.

When afternoon arrived, a knock sounded in the room where only Mari was around.

“.....Come in.”

Mari welcomed the visitor with a smile.

“Good afternoon!”

It was Ichinokuro Arisu with the usual bright smile on her face. Mari smiled back to her.

“Guess what. Even though you didn’t have any special request, I feel bad

coming empty-handed all the time. That's why, today I brought something for you."

Sitting on the visitor's seat casually, Arisu held out a large bag.

"Thank you."

While grinning happily, Mari gave her thanks.

I have no rights to meet with her..... no rights to be waiting for her—.

With those thoughts, Mari no longer felt any unease when she welcomed Arisu unlike before.

Even if someday Arisu decides not to come anymore, I would not hate her. I wouldn't feel sad either—.

After all, that's only to be expected.

Having deprived other people of their engagements, Mari couldn't be the only one to continue meeting Arisu. It was only fitting for her to be living in solitude as well.

*"Wawaa, sorry!"*

When Arisu opened the bag, the contents scattered all over the bed.

A large quantity of paper spilled before the surprised Mari. They were all dated, with the latest one bearing the title, 'Notice on the recent frequent explosion incidents'.

"These are the letters of notice handed out by the school since the first semester. Mari didn't receive a single one, right? See this, this was the previous cultural festival's programme list. Our class did a cafe. And then those boys completely revealed their perverted side when we were choosing the costume —"

While collecting the paper sheets, Arisu explained.

"This is.....?"

Mari held up a notebook she randomly plucked out from the mess.

"Ah, that's not supposed to be here. That's today's Math assignment. I thought I'd start on it when I return home."

“.....Can I see it?”

“Eh? Sure, go ahead.”

Flipping through the pages, she looked at the questions under today's date. Mari could understand the contents just barely even with her level of knowledge. In fact, the hardest part was trying to decipher that unique cursive handwriting.

“.....Ah.”

Mari lifted her head.

Arisu had seized the notebook back from Mari. She closed the notebook wordlessly and place it back into her bag.

“Arisu?”

“.....Sorry.”

Arisu closed her bag and stood up from the seat.

“Your complexion doesn't look so good today. How to say it, you look like you're suffering.”

At these words, Mari jerked in surprise. She had not slept a single wink last night, and she also barely touched her breakfast and lunch. Her body condition was undoubtedly at its worst today.

“Aah, I'm so slow, only noticing so late. ....I'll return home for today. Have a good sleep and let your body rest.”

Saying so, she smiled ashamedly.

“Ah—”

Mari quickly opened her mouth.

It was her own fault that she felt terrible, Arisu did not have to feel bad.

But, those words were not for someone like her to say.

However, when Mari thought about how lonely she would be after Arisu left, she could not help but open her mouth.

Arisu turned around with a, 'Nn?'.

“Will you..... still come by?”

At Mari’s words, Arisu’s expression became firm.

But then, a look of joy flashed across her face such that it almost looked like she was sparkling.

“I’ll come by tomorrow!”

Giving a thumbs-up to Mari, Arisu left.

She heard the sound of the door closing.

And then, silence.

“.....”

Mari looked over the papers she held on her hands.

Parsing through the papers, she saw that each of them was marked with pens of many different colours. On the piece of paper about the programme list of the cultural festival Arisu was talking about, there was a, ‘Like hell I’m wearing this!’, written. The arrow at which that phrase pointed to, was a miniskirt costume that did not even bother to hide the lascivious thoughts of the boys at all.

Mari burst into laughter unconsciously. She could imagine Arisu scribbling these during lesson, hidden from the view of the teacher.

“She’s a good girl.”

Out of nowhere, the young man in white coat appeared on the seat.

“.....”

Mari’s laughter faded.

Just what am I—.

Wandering between the land of the living and the dead, wanting to live even if it meant depriving others of their dreams.

Just what do I want to do.....?

A strange feeling was born in Mari’s heart.

This feeling that she felt for the first time, perhaps it was the feeling known as

‘joy’.

Being visited by Arisu and conversing with her brought Mari tremendous joy.

“Hey.”

With her gaze still on the papers, Mari muttered.

The young man looked toward Mari.

“From tomorrow..... can you help me with studies.”

Hearing Mari’s request, the young man widened his eyes slightly.

“Because the only thing I can do to repay her is to lend her a helping hand for her assignments.....”

Mari looked at the young man and said in a soft voice.

The young man smiled joyfully, as though he felt happy from the bottom of his heart.

“I’d be glad to.”

—See you tomorrow.

It’s okay even if it was a lie.

It’s okay even if she was betrayed someday.

Mari finally understood for the first time the true joy of hearing those words.

Starting the next day, Mari began to study.

In the morning, Mari pulled out the textbook from the back of the bookshelf. It was brand new, not been opened even once.

Mari had also not held a pencil for a very long time as well. As her condition was not at its best, she sat on her bed with the notebook propped up.

“It’s a good thing that you want to study, but don’t overdo it, okay?”

Seeing Mari coughing, the young man in white coat said.

“I’ll be alright.”

She replied with a smile. But, her condition couldn’t possibly have improved much since yesterday. Although she still felt some discomfort in her left chest,

she did not reach out for the tablets.

By the time she decided where to start from as well as settle on a schedule to follow, the morning was almost over. She continued to study Mathematics till it was noon, when Arisu visited.

“Good afternoon!”

Arisu arrived at the usual time.

As Arisu shared about the events that happened in school, Mari queried if she had any assignment for today. Arisu revealed a look of puzzlement as she replied that she did not. Although Mari felt a bit of regret, she immediately changed to another topic.

Arisu seemed like she just remembered and shared about herself. Such as how she suffered during her martial arts practice every morning, and what primary school did she graduated from et cetera.

Similar, Mari shared her own circumstances. About how she belonged to a house that was a master in flower arrangement or that she did not had any siblings. And also, about the primary school she attended before her condition worsened.

After they finished telling each other about themselves, the conversation naturally came to a halt.

Before they noticed, it was already night-time and visitation hours were over.

“What’s the matter, Mari?”

Arisu questioned with a puzzled look.

But, Mari was looking at the nightscape behind her—her gaze glued to the ring of light which dispelled the darkness of the night.

It was a Ferris wheel.

Speaking of which, Arisu had mentioned that before to Mari. At the plaza near the coastline, a new Ferris wheel was being built. With the construction proceeding smoothly, it seemed that the company had decided to light up the Ferris wheel until its completion as advertisement.



“Isn’t it beautiful, that Ferris wheel.....”

Unconsciously, Mari muttered.

Till now, only a vast expanse of darkness could be seen beyond the window, but currently, it looked as if a gigantic flower had bloomed. The brilliant light show drew Mari’s attention to it like moths to a flame.

“Then, let’s go together when you are discharged!”

Her face beaming, Arisu exclaimed.

Discharged—.

A throbbing pain struck her heart.

Arisu did not seem to have realised it.

About how hopelessly far that dazzling ring of light appeared to be in Mari’s eyes.

“.....Yea.”

Supressing her feelings, Mari narrowed her eyes.

“It’s a promise.”

Their smiles overlapped.

The following day, Mari continued her studies.

It appears that Mari was able to digest new knowledge quickly. In addition, she also had a good memory.

On the other hand, Arisu was weak in studying. In less than a month, Mari’s academic abilities had already surpassed that of Arisu.

“I can’t believe it.....”

Arisu said while feeling gobsmacked.

Mari’s notebook and textbooks laid at the side of her bed.

She finally had a chance show off the fruits of her studying. When Arisu mentioned about the difficulties she faced with her assignments, Mari had offered her a helping hand.

The problems which caused Arisu to groan for hours were easily solved by Mari.

“You need to use this here.....”

As Mari tried to explain to her, Arisu turned red as she frantically tried to find an excuse.

“I-I can also do it if I just put my mind to it! It’s just that I hate this subject, if not I wouldn’t even need to attend remedial lessons—”

“You..... need remedial lessons?”

“Uu.....”

Mari who kept up her studies.

Arisu who visited Mari every day without fail.

Their personalities may be the exact opposite of each other, nonetheless, that might be why they got along so well.

In contrast to Mari who thought things through rationally, Arisu was the kind of person to takes action without much thought. But, it was precisely this simple-mindedness about Arisu that Mari liked about her.

Mari’s nightly getaway from the hospital had also stopped ever since that night.

Just because of Arisu, Mari’s everyday life took on a noticeable change.

“.....”

On a certain afternoon, Mari twisted her face at the pain in her left chest.

“Mari!”

The young man who had been teaching her reached out to her in panic.

She felt her chest being constricted and her breathing became rough.

Mari quickly reached out for the glass bottle on the shelf, but then she stopped. —The number of tablets in the bottle had not decreased since a month ago.

It’s alright..... at this level, it will settle down in no time. Just like usual.....

She composed herself, taking deep breathes. After a while, the palpitations stopped.

“I’m okay. It has already stabilised.”

“Really?”

“Yea, it’s just a bit of pain in my chest. Lately, I’ve been feeling great.”

Mari gave a smile to the young man, causing him to sigh in relief.

“Is that so..... hopefully, there’d be some promising results in today’s check-up.”

Ever since the night Mari misused the tablets, she could feel her body gradually recovering. Even her hands felt like they had regained the grip strength she had in the past. However, she would still feel a seizure-like pain in her chest once in a while. Even so, it would always calm down after a while, and she feel to be in good condition otherwise.

At this rate, perhaps I can—.

The faint expectation caused her chest to heat up.

I can go to school together with Arisu.....?

Thinking about such matters, her heart soared.

However, her smile disappeared immediately.

“Mari.....?”

Despite seeing a ray of hope for the first time in her life, Mari could not simply chase after it.

Ever since that night, she had been thinking deeply.

“I..... Is it okay for me to be together with Arisu as it is?”

The young man creased his eyebrows.

Grasping her chest, Mari bit her lips.

I have deprived so many of their dreams..... despite all that, does someone like me even have the right to dream about the future—.

“If my illness could be cured, do I still have the rights to search for

happiness.....?”

Mari stared at the young man. A pain different from that of her illness assailed her heart.

“Mari.”

The young man’s expression softened.

“That is your dream, isn’t it?”

Mari jolted.

Her shoulders shook and her sight turned blurry.

“Can it..... come true.....? My dream..... really.....?”

The young man nodded.

I..... want to live—.

That was Mari’s dream which she had known from the start would not come true.

But now, it might be possible for her to see the continuation of her dream.

“Thank you, *Sensei*<sup>[4]</sup>.....”

Mari thanked him with a trailing voice.

“*Sensei*?”

“To thank you for teaching me..... and also because you are going on to become a great doctor, right? That’s why, I’ll call you *Sensei* from now on.....”

He had a proper name, but Mari chose not to call him by that. As she spoke, her voice was tinged with the sound of sobbing.

To Mari who wept soundlessly, *Sensei* seemed to shine so brightly.

—In the evening.

“Welcome back, Mari.”

Arisu greeted Mari who had just returned from her periodic check-up.

“I’m back.”

Mari returned the smile.

As usual, Arisu placed her assignments on the bed while they talked. As they chatted engrossedly, they even forgot about the questions and visitation hours was over in no time.

“Hey, this may be a weird question, but.”

Arisu who stood up from the seat inquired Mari with some hesitation.

“Eh?”

“Is there some other person visiting you apart from me?”

Mari tilted her head in thought. There shouldn't have been anyone else who visited her other than Arisu.

“Why do you ask?”

“Once in a while, I can feel some warmth on the seat. It's like as if someone was just sitting on it moments ago.”

Arisu had a look of wonder on her face.

Finally understanding what this was about, Mari grinned slyly. It must have been the body warmth left by the young man in white coat.

“.....Hey, Arisu.”

After thinking for a while, Mari looked up at Arisu.

“I have a request..... Is that alright?”

“So, it finally comes! Hit me with anything!”

Arisu leaned forwards in delight, after all, Mari had always declined any get-well gifts from her.

“There is something I want. However, that is not something I want for myself..... instead, I have a favour to ask of you.”

With these words as a preface, Mari requested of Arisu. At first, Arisu was a bit puzzled, then she simply agreed.

“Well then, see you tomorrow!”

The next day, as Mari requested, Arisu brought a small box.

Mari took the box and very carefully hid it under the blanket.

When night came and Arisu left, Mari waited for *Sensei*.

Now that she thought about it, this was the first time she was waiting for his visit. Sitting in the dimly lit room, Mari thought of what to say to him.

—Hey, *Sensei*. What do you think about this?

First, she would show *Sensei* the box. Surely, he would not be able to tell what is it for at first. Just imagining the inquisitive look he would have caused a smile to widen across Mari's face.

While waiting, before Mari even realised, she had fallen asleep.

“Nn.....”

Sensing the presence of somebody, Mari opened her eyes.

Looking at the clock, she found that it was already deep in the night. Raising her upper body, she found the figure of *Sensei* blending into the darkness.

“You're late today, *Sensei*.....”

Mari rubbed her eyes and smiled. Secretly groping under the blanket, she felt the sensation of the box.

“Y-yea.....”

However, the young man was averting his eyes away from Mari.

Looking at his mannerism, Mari felt a sense of unease. She immediately realised the source of her unease.

All this time when he was by her side, he had never once looked away from Mari. No matter whether it was when she felt depressed due to hollowness of her life, or when she threw her temper out of irritation, he had always looked straight at her.

“.....Hey, *Sensei*. I can't see your face from here, why don't you come closer.”

Mari directed her words at the young man who stood amidst the shadows. But, he look like he was struck by hesitation.

*Tokun, tokun*—Mari could hear the sound of her heartbeat hasten. Even when

she stared at *Sensei* until her eyes went dry, she could not blink.

Mari's hunch made her recall about one matter.

"The report for yesterday's periodic check-up was released today....."

She saw his shoulders trembled.

"Tell me the result. Please, *Sensei*....."

*Sensei* did not speak a word, only maintaining his silence From his taciturnity, Mari could already infer the results of the check-up.

—See you tomorrow!

Arisu's smiling face came into her mind before disappearing right after.

## Part 5

A witch visited Patricia who was afflicted with sickness.

She said as such.

Here is a potion made by an angel, as well as one by the devil. If you drink the angel's potion, you will lose all your loved one, but in return your sickness would be cured and you would live on. On the other hand, if you drink the devil's potion, your illness will remain and you will die. However, you will always be remembered by your loved one. Now, which will you choose?

And so, Patricia replied like this.

I want the devil's potion.

And the witch granted her request.

Thus, Patricia entered an eternal sleep under the watchful eyes of her loved one.

Even so, Patricia never felt lonely, for her loved ones would regularly come to visit her on the hill where she rests—.

“.....”

Closing the picture book, 'Potion of Magic', Mari gazed out the window peacefully.

When morning came, the attending doctor made his usual rounds, finished his usual consultation with few words and left. Mari found it laughable how he had tried not to let his discomposure show.

Mari was completely calm. But, inside her heart which resembled a lull sea, a small ripple propagated. Slowly but gradually, the ripple expanded.

A sardonic smile appeared on her face.

She recalled the exchange she had with *Sensei* the night before.



—This is not the end. If you underwent operation.....

Mari laughed off his words.

—Can my body even withstand the operation?

And his words were quashed. It was only this moment that Mari felt like ridiculing him for his honest to a fault nature.

Mari had already discovered the truth of her condition through her own research. For her heart which had weakened till the point where she required an operation, it would not be strange for it to stop anytime. That day might be tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow..... whenever it was, Mari was sure that that day would not be too far off. The frequent pains she experienced recently are an indication of the fact that the countdown has already started.

In the room devoid of people, *Sensei* appeared.

“.....”

He seemed to be saying something to Mari who was staring out of the window, but his words could not reach her.

In Mari's heart, a new wave spawned. The waves overlapped with each other, causing their heights to grow even taller.

—Can it..... come true.....? My dream..... really.....?

Who was it that had muttered that while crying.

“How idiotic.....”

*Sensei* did not seem to have heard her soft mumbles. He muttered a ‘Eh?’, to which Mari closed her mouth once again.

*I want the devil's potion.*

The words of the protagonist of the picture book came into her mind before disappearing again.

I don't need the devil's potion..... If it was me, I'd choose the angel's—.

A silver Morpho butterfly descended by Mari's side.

“.....”

Looking at the Morpho butterfly which rested on her shoulder, Mari had a certain thought.

One could even call it an angel's whisperings.

The thought that randomly came up in her mind was extremely ridiculous—dreadful even. But, the sweet angel-like whisperings within her head generated new waves in her heart.

—See you tomorrow.

She thought of Arisu's pure and innocent smile. To Mari who was trapped in the enclosed hospital room, Arisu's bright smile seemed to belong to that of angels.

Mari wanted the angel's potion.

In that case, who was Mari's angel.....?

"I want the angel's potion....."

A smile formed naturally on Mari's face.

"Mari.....?"

She wondered what kind of smile she had on her face at that time. *Sensei* had been startled upon seeing that face.

*I want the devil's potion.*

I want the angel's potion—.

The voice of Patricia and herself mingled in her head.

Then, Mari noticed the presence of a certain object on the bed.

It was the small box.

That reminded her that she had cleanly forgotten about her intention to hand it over to *Sensei*.

"*Sensei*."

Mari turned with a smile to the young man in white coat. *Sensei* who seemed to be embroiled in his thoughts looked up.

"Yes?"

Mari held out the small box to him who was obviously forcing a smile.

“This is, for me?”

“Yes. This is a present from me to *Sensei*.”

He looked surprised for a moment before revealing his joy. He opened the small box and took out what was inside.

It was a silver necklace with a gold ring affixed on it.

Previously, while Mari went out for a *hunt*, she came across the necklace on display and developed a liking for it. The favour she requested from Arisu was for her to buy it in her stead.

“This is another proof that I had lived...”

In contrast to Mari who had a serene smile, *Sensei* had a look of pain.

“The other proof, I leave with Arisu..... If she knew what my dream was, surely she would hate me for it.”

“Hate you.....?”

The young man knitted his eyebrows. Mari shifted her view from him to the scenery outside the window.

“.....Yeah, I know it for sure.”

She nodded.

Mari knew better than anyone else how sincere Arisu was.

“Because Arisu is kind, even for my request, she will.....”

*Sensei* stared doubtfully at Mari who wore an innocent smile. But at the presence beyond the door, he immediately disappeared.

After a few more knocks, the door opened.

A familiar girl entered the room. She had mentioned yesterday that she would be coming in the morning as today onwards was a consecutive holiday.

“Arisu.”

Mari welcomed her close friend with a smile.

Arisu froze for a moment, as if she was charmed by her smile. But, she soon came to her senses and took a seat.

The Morpho butterfly took flight from Mari's shoulder.

"Hey Arisu, listen to me. I am....."

"Nn?"

Arisu lifted her face. Facing her directly, a pain ran through Mari's heart.

I am actually a Mushitsuki. And also, soon..... I'll drink the angel's potion—.

"No, nevermind....."

Stopping before she was about to speak, her face twisted slightly. She clenched her fists holding the sheets.

She must not tell her. Arisu should not know about it. For some reason, Mari thought so.

"My dream, can I entrust it to you?"

It seems like Arisu could not comprehend the meaning behind Mari's question. She returned a blank stare to Mari.

Mari shook her head, laughing frailly.

"Sorry, that was nothing....."

Arisu tilted her head with a, 'Is that so?', and laughed amusedly.

"I guess Mari's kind of weird after all."

"That may be so, but not as much as you, Arisu."

"Y-you're kidding right. Is there really something strange about me?"

The two continued their conversation all the way till night-time.

As the end of visitation hours arrived, Arisu stood up from her seat.

Mari stared absentmindedly at Arisu who was about to leave.

"Hey, Arisu."

Unconsciously, she opened her mouth.

"If I was gone, would you be sad?"

Arisu widened her eyes, and then her eyebrows rised immediately. It was an expression that Mari only saw for the first time.

Both of her cheeks were hit with the sound of a smack.

Mari had no idea what just happened. Her eyes stared in astonishment at Arisu's face right in front of her.

Arisu had lightly clasped Mari's cheeks with her hands. In that position, she continued to held Mari's head. The warmth of her hands was transmitted to Mari through her cheeks.

"I'll get angry if you say this kind of things again, okay!"

Arisu glowered at Mari with a look of seriousness.

Mari's sight started to distort. Despite the tears welling in her eyes, a smile formed on her face.

"This is the first time I've seen you get mad."

Noticing her tears, Arisu got flustered.

"Aah, sorry! Is it painful?"

"No....."

Wiping off the tears with her index finger, Mari smiled. It was just for a bit, but Mari felt a warmth sprout in her heart compared to the other times she cried.

"Thank you."

Arisu blushed.

The huge wave in Mari's heart seemed to subside a little.

And goodbye—.

She added in her heart.

Arisu pronounced with an ear-to-ear grin.

"See you tomorrow!"

Mari's heart throbbed.

I see, that's right—.

In response to Arisu's feelings, Mari sent her off with the greatest smile she could muster.

I'll still see you tomorrow, right—.

"Yup, see you tomorrow!"

With that, Arisu left.

And so, Mari's tears stopped.

The attending doctor came for the pre-night consultation. He informed her, 'Your family will be visiting you tomorrow'. He probably intended to reveal the severity of Mari's current condition to her at that time. And then, he would recommend for her to undergo surgery despite the futility of it. Mari merely replied with a, 'Is that so'.

After the attending doctor left and the lights off, *Sensei* appeared in the dim room.

"Hey, *Sensei*..... what happens to a Mushi after its owner dies?"

He bit his lips when he heard that.

"The Mushi..... will disappear as well. That's because people's dream fade away as they die."

"That doesn't make sense."

Mari muttered as she gazed out of the window. She could see the slowly revolving Ferris wheel as it changed colour.

"Don't you think that there are some dreams that remain even after their owner has died?"

The young man did not respond, plunging the room into silence once more.

Mari gazed at the Ferris wheel tranquilly while time passed.

The colour of the Ferris wheel changed once again.

When the needle of the clock pointed to one o'clock.

Mari lowered herself from the bed quietly.

“.....!”

Unable to exert strength in her legs, she tumbled on the floor.

“Mari!”

*Sensei* lifted Mari up.

Like a bursting dam, her heartbeat rose wildly. The pain and difficulty breathing made her face twist up.

“*Haah.....! Haah.....!*”

She blacked out for a moment as she wheezed.

—See you tomorrow.

Even as light faded from her eyes, all she could think of was the time she spent with Arisu. She went over each and every conversation they had, from the day they first met up until today.

“Mari!”

At *Sensei*’s voice, Mari regained consciousness.

Still out of breath, Mari flashed an ironic smile.

It’s not just my body..... even my heart is becoming hollow.

When one utilises the power of their Mushi, they pay the price of having their dream consumed. When one’s stamina and willpower burns out, their power as a Mushitsuki rapidly weakens as well.

Mari quickly reached out for the glass bottle on the shelf. But before she could do so, *Sensei* took it.

“You must not took anymore of this. This will only cause your symptoms to worsen.”

“*Haah..... Haah.....*”

Clutching her chest, Mari glared at *Sensei*. However, she immediately turned away and headed for the closet. Stripping off her current outfit, she put on the white coat placed within.

“I don’t need that anymore.....”

“Where are you going.....? Don’t tell me, you’re going out with that body—”

Ignoring the young man, she grabbed her crutch and approached the window.





Mari felt a slight pressure on her arm.

*Sensei* glared at Mari with a strict gaze. Mari could tell from his expression that only tonight, he would not allow her to go out even if he had to use force.

“You can’t go out. I won’t let you go, Mari.”

“This is first time I see *Sensei* get angry. But you were too late. Just earlier, Arisu had already gotten angry at me.”

The Morpho butterfly flew to the side of the smiling Mari. The feelers extending out from the transforming butterfly became one with Mari’s sick-ridden body. The crutch also turned into a spear, with the four wings of the butterfly coming together to form a single blade.

Energy filled Mari’s entire body. The pain in her chest disappearing, she turned around to face *Sensei*.

“*Sensei* mentioned this before, right. The person known as..... Kusuriya Daisuke? You said that he’s a strong Mushitsuki, but who is stronger between him and the current me?”

Mari focused her sharp glint at *Sensei* from within the hat and muffler.

“Right now, I..... feel like I would not lose to anyone. Even if it’s against one of the *Original Three*, Aria Varej—even if it’s you.”

She knew that he had taken a gulp.

Taking advantage of the moment when he softened the grip on her arm, Mari leapt out of the window.

“Mari!”

With the silver spear in her hand, she jumped right over the hospital’s fence.

The thought of preserving her strength never even crossed her mind. Running from shadow to shadow, she scurried across Akamaki City in the night.

Borrowing the power of the Mushi to exceed her body’s limits, Mari could feel something fading inside her heart. But, even so, she did not stop for a single moment.

See you tomorrow—.

She thought of Arisu's smile.

I..... want to live—.

And of her own dream.

*"Haah..... Haah....."*

The rate of her heartbeat rising, Mari's face twisted.

Mari and Arisu, dream and friend; the two differing thoughts clashed violently within her.

Mari was at a loss.

She must make a decision.

But, before she decide, there was something she must know no matter what. She could not choose without knowing that first.

If she cannot make the decision, she would be left with nothing and no hope.

*"I'll find you for sure tonight..... definitely.....!"*

Who knew how long she had ran.

As she was running through an alley, the spear started to glow, prompting her to stop.

Over at the dim walkway in front of her, a single boy stood. He looked only slightly older than Mari. The side profile of the boy illuminated by the light from the expressway seemed razor-sharp.

The boy had noticed Mari. By his feet, a Mushi as tall as an adult appeared. Having over hundreds of abnormally long legs, its long and narrow wriggling body resembled that of a centipede.

*"Elvioréne's Mushi....."*

Mari rushed forward to the boy unhesitatingly.

Facing the attacking Mari, the boy's movements were agile. With no intentions of counterattacking, he turned around and ran into an alley opposite the expressway.

*"I won't let you escape.....!"*

In terms of running speed, Mari was vastly superior. Turning around the corner, she had already caught up to him.

While running, the boy was speaking into a mobile phone. Mari swung the spear down at the centipede running alongside the boy.

The silver scales released gouged into the ground.

However, the centipede had swiftly climbed onto the wall, avoiding the blow.

Spinning the spear around, Mari launched a second attack. But, it seemed like the centipede had been expecting the attack. Sliding onto the ground without making any sound, it also dodged the second attack.

This person has experience fighting.....!

Clenching her teeth, Mari let loose a consecutive series of slashes. However, not a single one of them hit.

“I don’t have the time to waste on a single opponent like you.....!”

Spitting out in irritation, Mari swung the spear with greater strength. The silver scales released from the spear destroyed the path the boy was running on, sending him and the centipede rolling on the ground.

*“Kh.....!”*

Mari was just about to thrust her spear at the defenceless Mushi, but—.

*“!”*

A sudden piercing pain struck her heart. Unable to breathe, her whole body stiffened up as if struck by lightning. She felt something vital in her body breaking.

The spear stabbed into the ground.

*“Haah! Haah!”*

Supporting herself with the spear stabbed into the ground, Mari grabbed her chest.

*“.....?”*

Having escaped from a pinch, the boy looked at Mari warily. He then quickly

stood up and ran down the alley.

“Wai-.....!”

Mari pulled the spear from the ground and continued to chase after the boy. However, it was as if the lightness of her body previously was a lie and her limbs were currently as heavy as lead.

My body is already so weak..... that not even the Mushi’s power can support it.....?

Dragging along her broken body, Mari bit her lips.

Even my body..... wouldn’t allow..... this last bit of wilfulness.....!

Her face twisting, she continued down the alley using the spear as a crutch.

Please.....! Just a bit more..... I only need a bit longer..... because this is the last time.....!

When Mari exited the murky alley, a large piece of land greeted her eyes. Rusted steel frames and construction machines were discarded haphazardly, giving the impression of a graveyard of scrap metal.

“*Haaah, Haaah.....*”

In her hands, the silver spear emitted a radiance brighter than it ever did.

“Looks like it’s not just because its dream is being consumed. ....It’s sick?”

Further in the scrapyard, the owner of the centipede muttered.

“That doesn’t matter. This is the *Hunter*, isn’t it? In that case, we will just take our revenge for all the anguish it’s caused us.”

Said another boy who commanded a gigantic Mushi which resembled a Hummingbird Hawk-moth with long triangular shaped feelers.

“Isn’t it just a kid. Eh? It’s a girl?”

Sitting atop one of the construction machine, a blond-haired male spoke in a light tone. A Mushi with mottled wings and a needle on its round abdomen hovered above his head.

Furthermore, in a corner, there was a timid-looking boy. Mari had some

remembrance of the boy. He was the Mushitsuki who Mari had let escape a month ago. When he met Mari's gaze, he cowered and ran away into a back alley.

“.....”

A young girl walked towards the centre of the scrapyard. Her age seems to be around that of Mari. But, her beautifully sculpted face in addition to the sharp gaze which seemed like it could cut through darkness would cause anyone to take a gulp. Next to her, a Mushi with a small but thick and round shell followed with its mouthpiece wriggling. There were seven red spots on the shell.

“Haaah..... Haaah.....”

The hand grabbing onto her chest tightened.

It was a trap. It was clear that they had intentionally led Mari to this place.

“You are the *Hunter*, right.”

The girl at the centre spoke in a dignified and resounding voice. Her voice filled with vigour broke the tense atmosphere.

“Now, tell us the reason why you are hunting the Mushitsuki on these streets.”

*Hunter*—that was what they referred to Mari as.

A smile formed on Mari's face even as she remained out of breath.

“.....You people.....”

Mari took several deep breathes. The palpitations of her heart gradually relaxed.

It's alright..... I can still go on for just a bit—.

She filled her arms with strength, grasping the spear tighter.

The girl placed her hands on her waist and talked.

“We are a group of friends who had met on the streets and banded together to escape from a *certain organisation*. However, we would never have thought that there would be another Mushitsuki that would hunt fellow Mushitsuki apart from them—”

“All four..... have Elvioréne’s Mushi. *Fufu*, I’m glad.....”

As Mari’s smile deepened, the four youths eyed her suspiciously.

To Mari who was in a rush for time, finding four Mushi gathered together at one place could only be referred to as good luck.

The girl frowned.

“Elvio..... réne?”

“Dioresutoi’s Mushi are just hindrances..... Of course, that goes the same for Aria Vareí’s Mushi such as my own..... However, the one which numbers the most and are the most unpleasant..... belongs to that woman, whose appetite is as voracious as he mentioned.....”

While catching her breath, Mari muttered in a soliloquy. The girl and her friends stirred in unease.

“Is there something that you know? Something about us Mushitsuki..... about the Mushi!”

“I do know..... Mushitsuki of Elvioréne..... even the fact that you people are the most beyond salvation amongst us..... As long as you are around, Elvioréne will indefinitely..... *Fufu*.....”

By this time, Mari already had no idea about what she was talking. Whether it was because of the lack of blood flowing into her brain, or that she have overused the power of the Mushi and had lost most of her dream, Mari could only hear the violent beating of her heart from within.

Their expressions changed.

“Just what in the world do you know? Spit it out!”

“Anyway, all of that doesn’t matter to me.....”

Mumbling those words, Mari readied her spear once more. The first target in her sights was the girl’s Mushi. With seven red spots on its back, it reminded one of a ladybird.

Kicking off the ground, Mari rushed at the girl.

However, three Mushi cut into the space between Mari and the girl

straightaway. The centipede crawled along the ground, the Hummingbird Hawk-moth flew directly in front of her and the mottled bee buzzed overhead with its needle primed.

Mari was unfazed, swinging the spear horizontally in a straight line.

Silver scales gushed out from the spear.

Gouging a gash on the ground, the blast sent several metal beams flying away.

“.....!”

However, Mari saw three figures pass by in the edge of her vision.

At the same time as when Mari attacked, the three Mushi split off and escaped into her blind spot. The centipede and the Hummingbird Hawk-moth restrained Mari’s spear with their fangs and antennas respectively.

The needle of the bee closed in from above her.

Right now, I..... feel like I would not lose to anyone—.

Mari had said that to *Sensei*.

The conviction behind those words had not dissipated even in the least, even as the flame of her life is currently on the verge of extinguishing.

“Wha-.....!”

The gasps of surprise from the youths overlapped.

Displaying inhuman strength, Mari forcefully swung the spear around. Along with the two Mushi clinging onto it, the shaft of the spear smashed the bee onto the ground. The three Mushi rolled turbulently on the ground.

But in the next moment, Mari was hit on her back by a shockwave.

“.....!”

Catching a glimpse behind her, she saw a ladybird with its wings opened. She could feel an invisible shockwave being released in her direction.

*Pssh—.*

Mari knew that something has cracked somewhere in her body. Her knitted



hat blown away, revealing her long hair.

To the previous her, a weak shockwave like that would not even cause her as much to stagger. However, just one blow from the ladybird now was able to cause something important inside her to break.

*“Aaaaah!”*

Mari released a beast-like howl.

Widening her eyes, she turned around and threw the spear with all her strength.



A silver light pierced through the darkness.

“Rina!”

The blond youth shouted. The mottled bee rammed into the ladybird, pushing it out of the way.

The shining spear penetrated the bee’s torso, skewering it into the wall of the building. The momentum of the spear was so strong that it caused the surrounding structure to collapse.

*“Guah!”*

“Ryuuji!”

The scream of the girl called Rina echoed in the back alley. The three of them ran towards the blond youth.

*“Haaah! Haaah!”*

Having difficulty breathing, Mari staggered towards the wall where the spear was impaled in.

“It’s not him either..... faster..... the next Mushi.....”

Mari pulled out the spear. The body of the bee fell onto the ground, scattering bodily fluids everywhere before disappearing into a haze.

“I don’t want to die..... in a place like this without finding anything.....!”

The spear hanging off her hand, Mari walked in a half-dead manner towards the girl’s group.

“.....‘I don’t want to die’?”

Embracing the fallen youth who was ashen pale like a doll, Rina lifted her face. Her tears-stricken face was distorted with anger.

“Just because you are afraid of dying alone, how many people do you think you’ve dragged along?”

Rina and the other two had the same look as they glared at Mari.

“I will absolutely never forgive you.....!”

Mari grasped her right arm which was holding the spear with her left hand. —

Like water spilling from a glass, strength was leaving her arms.

“I don’t have much time.....”

Mari did not have the luxuriance to deal with these small fries at a place this. After defeating Rina and the rest, there was still a Mushi that she must find no matter what.

“If you’re going to get in my way, I’ll just kill all of your Mushi. Just like how I’ve done so thus far.....”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!”

Rina stood up.

“The one that’s going to die is you!”

Mari aimed at the three Mushi and dashed. The opposing Mushi also directed their attacks at Mari.

But, at that moment.

Mari’s spear started to shine even brighter. The four wings forming the spearhead flapped greatly, producing a large quantity of silver scales.

“.....!”

Approaching unnoticed, a large group of people in white coat had surrounded the area. They were all dress uniformly, with a large goggle covering most of their face and a white long coat with belts hiding their body. In addition, each of them had a Mushi by their side.

“Target confirmed! Capture it!”

Following the command, the Mushi of the people in white coat all attacked Mari and the rest at once.

The Special Environmental Preservation Bureau.....!

Having heard from *Sensei*, Mari knew of the identity of the attackers. They belonged to an organisation that captures and isolates Mushitsuki, in order to make true the official stance of the government in which they are ‘non-existent’.

“Where are you looking at, *Hunter*!”

“.....!”

The ladybird facing Mari spread its wings. Mari instantaneously swung the spear in response.

The shockwave hit Mari in her chest squarely.

*Pssh—.*

For a moment, Mari’s heart stopped.

Time froze. All sound and pain disappeared from Mari’s surroundings.

—See you tomorrow!

The image of Arisu’s dazzling smile burned into her mind cracked a little.

“.....*Auu!*”

Rina recoiled as she cried in pain.

Once again, time began to flow.

The single strike released by Mari scraped off a part of the ladybird. Taking advantage of the moment she flinched, the people in white coat moved in to hold down Rina.

“Rina!”

“Don’t worry about me..... the two of you just escape.....!”

Numerous Mushi were also headed towards Mari.

“.....”

Mari swung her spear wordlessly.

Silvers scales released from the spear blew away those Mushi.

That ladybird..... isn’t it either—.

Muttering in her heart, she brandished her spear repeatedly and broke out of the encirclement.

“.....”

Blowing away several Mushi, Mari dashed into a back alley.

.....Isn’t it? What..... isn’t it.....?

Wondering in confusion, she just ran through the darkness at full speed.

*“Haah..... Haah.....”*

Her breathing sped up steadily. Conversely, her running speed started to drop steeply.

*“Haah, Haah, Haah.....”*

Slowing down from a run to a walk, Mari continued to advance along the dark alley with her head drooping.

*“Haaah! Haaah.....!”*

The sound of her breathing and her drumming heartbeat irritated her deeply.

I..... was searching for something..... But, what is it.....?

She could not even exert any strength into the hand grasping her chest anymore.

Her memories and dreams were fading. On the other hand, an unspeakable terror and emptiness began to encroach her heart.

I..... must find that something..... If not, there will be nothing left for me.....!

Her face twisted. She felt herself being slowly cornered by pain and sadness.

—I’ll get angry if you say this kind of things again, okay!

She could hear somebody’s voice.

However, she could not remember who did that voice belong to.

The important and irreplaceable ‘something’ inside her scattered like petals and faded away successively.

I..... don’t want to disappear..... just like that.....

Ultimately, Mari’s legs completely lost strength and both of her knees slumped onto the filthy ground.

“Have you already reached your limit..... Spear-type of Aria Vare?”

Suddenly, she could hear a voice.

*“.....!”*

Faster than she could think, the *Hunter* instinct of her body reacted. In a kneeling position, Mari thrust the spear in the direction of the voice.

She could feel a response. But—.

“Don’t waste your energy on useless actions.....”

Due to the glaring neon display behind him, she could only see the silhouette of the owner of the voice.

Mari’s spear had definitively plunged into something. It was stuck into the torso of the human-shaped silhouette. There was a laceration at the spot where the spear had gouged into.

However, the human-shaped silhouette regenerated back till its original state right before her eyes.

Seeing that, Mari’s fragmented memories began to fit into pieces.

“The *Undying*..... Mushitsuki.....”

Mari muttered.

“Is this..... real.....?”

There was no response from the silhouette.

The *Undying* Mushitsuki—indeed, that was what Mari had been searching for since forever.

Mari had met the young man in white coat and became a Mushitsuki.

Sickness and Mushi..... she passed her days living in fear of death caused by these two factors. In addition to that, everyday was empty and monotonous.

“You..... do not die.....?”

The spear fell from Mari’s hands.

However, in that everyday life, the appearance of a certain girl completely changed everything.

—See you tomorrow.

Ichinokuro Arisu.

She had acknowledged Mari and accompanied her every day. She was Mari’s

first ever friend, the one who always promised to meet her the next day.

Thanks to Arisu, Mari managed to gain some hope. For the first time in her life, she had a reason to live. That was to attend school together with her—.

She wanted to live.

She had thought that her dream was nearly within reach.

However, that was but an illusion.

“Did you..... drank the angel’s potion.....?”

Despair and hope.

Just what was the point of living for Mari whose life swung between those two extremes on a whim?

To disappear just like that, isn’t it just too cruel?

“The ‘Potion of Magic’ eh.....”

The silhouette muttered. The voice sounded like that of a young man who still had some remnants of adolescence. However, the emotions behind the voice seemed to belong to that of an old man.

In her hazy view, the silhouette looking down on Mari appeared to her as the Patricia that appeared in the picture book. It was a different Patricia which had drank the angel’s potion instead and lived a prolonged life.

—A witch visited Patricia who was afflicted with sickness.

She said as such.

Here is a potion made by an angel, as well as one by the devil. If you drink the angel’s potion, you will lose all your loved one, but in return your sickness would be cured and you would live on. On the other hand, if you drink the devil’s potion, your illness will remain and you will die. However, you will always be remembered by your loved one. Now, which will you choose?

And so, Patricia replied like this.

I want the devil’s potion—.

“Hey, tell me..... how does it feel to not die.....? What do you, who managed



to live on, think? I..... I.....”

As her life burns out, a certain thought came up in Mari’s mind.

“I..... want the angel’s potion.....”

It was an extremely dreadful notion; an awfully cruel method.

“.....I want to see..... the continuation of my dream.....”

But, to Mari who could not escape from the clutches of death, this was the only method left to her.

The method for Mari to live on.

To Mari, her angel was none other than her close friend, Ichinokuro Arisu. From her, Mari would receive life.

“That’s why, I..... will become Arisu.....”

She looked at her hands which were covered in silver patterns.

The Morpho butterfly which is the manifestation of Mari’s dream.

If Arisu inherits the Morpho butterfly in which Mari’s dream lie, perhaps—.

“Because that girl is kind..... she will definitely listen to my request.....”

Her hands trembled. A frail smile formed on her lips.

“Indeed, you could say that I have drunk the angel’s potion.....”

The silhouette muttered. The soft voice almost sounded dry and weary to her.

Mari had thought that she must meet the *Undying* Mushitsuki no matter what.

At first, she intended to curse and shout at him when they met. To Mari who was sealed to the fate of dying, the fact that there was someone who could not die was unpermissible to her.

Mari raised her head.

But now, such thing doesn’t matter anymore.

Tonight, Mari had cut off her hesitation for the sake of meeting the *Undying* Mushitsuki. If that person was no longer bound to the fear and unease of death,

then they would no doubt have the answer to Mari's question—.

“You may have the choice to choose between the two potions before you presently..... If so, then let me question the you who have drunk the angel's potion.”

The tone of the silhouette changed. It questioned Mari directly.

“Having gotten a new lease of life, who would be by your side?”

Mari widened her eyes.

The insides of her head were completely dyed white.

—See you tomorrow!

The smiling face of her close friend came into her mind before disappearing.

In her vacant consciousness, the scene that appeared in a flash, that was—.

The figure of herself from before she met Arisu, imprisoned in the small hospital room where there was nobody and no one ever came to visit—.

“You..... mustn't be deceived by the devil camouflaged as an angel.”

That voice no longer reached Mari's ears.

She slowly covered her face with her shivering hands.

Ah, I see.....

She finally became aware of her misconception.

“I had been mistaken..... over what was important.....”

She murmured blurrily.

Just the slightest bit of strength welled up in her legs. That was undoubtedly the final bit of strength she had remaining in her waning life.

“.....I must go.....”

She stood up and walked.

—See you tomorrow!

That was what Arisu said.

Mari must keep this promise that she made with her precious friend no

matter what.

The silhouetted person did not stop Mari as she walked away.

Patricia had replied as such.

I want the devil's potion—.

“I.....”

Mari's mutterings melted into the darkness of the alley.

## Part 6

In the heartland of Akamaki City.

The morning sun ray shined upon a corner of the high-end residential area.

A silvery figure landed on the roof of a detached house with a *don*.

*“Haah..... Haah.....”*

The sound of rough breathing jumbled into the sound of birds chirping.

Mari, who was fused with the Morpho butterfly, gazed underneath with a pale complexion.

Her line of sight was fixed on an estate that stood much larger than the surrounding ones.

*“Haah..... Haah.....”*

With a smile, she sat down on the rooftop.

But, there was a prior visitor.

Is this another one of your home as well? Excuse me for occupying here a bit —.

Her lips moved, forming into the shape of words, but with no voice coming out. Only the sound of heavy breathing came from her mouth.

What Mari was facing was the black cat with a kinked tail, which raised its fur on its end upon seeing her. From its appearance and enmity towards her, she could tell that it was the same black cat she saw previously countless of times.

*“Haah..... Haah.....”*

Her breathing was not relaxing, instead the interval between each gasp shortened. At the same time, her heartbeat drummed in her ears irritatingly.

Please, just a little more.....

She grasped her chest and clenched her teeth.

Just a bit longer would be enough.....

The Morpho butterfly separated from Mari's body. Her muffler fallen off, the Morpho butterfly rested on Mari's shoulder with her face revealed.

Hey, Arisu. Will you please listen.....?

She had already given up on voicing it out loud. That's why, she muttered in her heart.

To my dream, my request.....

In contrast to her rough breathing, her heart was as calm as a millpond.

In her mind, memories of the past resurfaced one after another.

Laden by her sickness, she was shut in a small room.

It was a barren space with nobody and no one ever came to visit. During those day, her heart has been worn thin by the solitude even more so than her illness.

Then, she met *Sensei*.

I..... want to live—.

Her dream was heard by *Sensei*. And thus, Mari became a Mushitsuki.

Even with *Sensei's* frequent visits, the loneliness nested deep in her heart could not be erased.

Exasperated by the ennui of her daily life, the *Hunter* persona of Mari was born.

As if possessed, she robbed others of their dreams every night. Although her original intention was to search for the *Undying* Mushitsuki, now that she reflected, it was just as the girl called Rina said. She had purely been doing so to vent her anger and frustration. When she finally realised the true consequence of what she had done, she had been paralysed with fear.

And then—she met Ichinokuro Arisu.

Hugging her knees, her lips formed into a smile.

She still remembered clearly all the conversations she had with Arisu. Be it what they talked about and laughed about. She would repeat the conversations in her head as she laid in bed at night, in anticipation for tomorrow's visit.

When she learnt about her eventual end, she was crushed by despair once again.

Lost and at wits end, she reverted to her past self.

“.....”

Her breathing finally calmed down, her smile also turned tranquil.

The sound of her heartbeat began to soften.

She no longer felt any fear or unease as she gaze down peacefully.

She had finally found it.

Her very own answer to the question that has always plagued her.

The words of the witch whispering into her ears while she was falling into despair.

—Now, which will you choose?

Right now, Mari could answer unhesitatingly.

You know, Arisu, I—.

Mari smiled so widely that her smile seemed to reach her ears.

Right in her view, the door to the estate opened. A lone girl dashed out hurriedly. In her hand was a bouquet of flowers picked arbitrarily. Was she planning to arrange them in the water pitcher again?



It began to melt away.

Her life, and the continuation of her dream.

Even the scene of the girl running under the morning sunshine slowly vanished.

“Good morning, Arisu.”

Imparted with her dream and wish, Mari spoke.

“See you tomorrow, okay.”

The silver Morpho butterfly flew into the sky—.

The black cat purred softly.

Approaching her softly, it licked her pale limp hand gently.

Suddenly, the black cat’s ears folded up.

Raising its light body, it jumped away from Mari.

“.....”

A person looked down on Mari who laid down with her eyes closed and a smile on her face.

It was the lanky young man wearing a white coat.

A single teardrop fell on the dry rooftop.

With his strong arms, he lifted up Mari’s body—.



## Part 7

Silver light flooded through the window.

Who was it who opened the window?

A cold wind blew through the spotless private room devoid of any signs of life.

Closing the door behind her, Ichinokuro Arisu entered the room.

It was a certain general hospital in Akamaki City.

Even within the hospital, one could tell that this room was special at a glance. In addition to the high-class bed, there was also a bookshelf, a television and even a nurse call line.

“Hello, Mari.”

Arisu approached the bed.

Having entered the room since who knows when, a single butterfly fluttered above Arisu’s head. It was a Morpho butterfly with wings shimmering in silvery brilliance.

There was no one else in the room.

—It had been exactly one year since Mari left this world.

“I’ll leave the flowers here, okay.”

She placed the bouquet of flowers into the water pitcher atop the basin.

She tried putting on a smiling face, but she failed to do so.

That the water pitcher was not a flower vase, it was only when the boy who lived with her—when Kusuriya Daisuke ridiculed her, that she realised it for the first time.

On this day one year ago, Arisu had visited this room just like today carrying a bouquet of flowers.

—Good morning!

Having expected a warm welcome from Mari as always, she was greeted by a wordless Mari however.

To the stunned Arisu, the attending doctor pronounced to her that Mari had taken her last breath without anyone knowing—.

Arisu was dressed in mourning clothes as she gazed at the empty bed.

The one year death anniversary held by the Hanashiro family was an exceedingly muted event. Apart from her relatives, the only other mourner of the same generation as Mari was Arisu.

“Mari.....”

A plaster adorned her clenched fist. It was an injury she sustained from the fight against the matured Mushi the other day.

Even now, I am still fighting so as to figure out what were you really thinking —.

Arisu muttered in her heart. Instead, what came out of her mouth was a question directed to her close friend. The only indication of the fact that Mari stayed in this room was the bookshelf lined to the brim with books. That was a request by her family, to leave the room as it was.

“Why..... why didn’t you tell me anything.....?”

She felt a presence approach behind her.

“If you’re done here, then let’s go.”

Arisu did not even need to turn around to know who it was. It was Kusuriya Daisuke who she knew very well, a Mushitsuki that had fought together with her.

“But, don’t worry. I will definitely find out is it, what your real wish is, Mari.....”

Saying so, Arisu turned around with a smile on her face.

What was Mari thinking when she entrusted the Morpho butterfly to Arisu.

She would definitely find that out.

Mari's true dream—.

“Can't you even wait for a bit? Boys without patience are not popular, you know.”

“I don't want to hear that from you who is acting sentimentally out of character—”

*“Arisu upper~!”*

Along with a dull thud, the door to the empty room was closed.

A breeze blew from the window, causing the book at the corner to collapse. The pages of the book—‘Potion of Magic’, flapped gently in the wind.

To be continued

# Afterword

A while ago, I went to Odaiba with my friends to have fun.

We drank and ate and played games and rode the Ferris wheel.....

That was a familiar scenery to us just two, three years ago, when we were still students.

As we watched movies till late in the night, what a group of us three males thought of was to go to the hot spring. And so, we took a taxi to the nearby hot spring.

When we reached, it had just closed. By the time we turned back in a daze, the taxi had already left leaving us alone in the parking lots.

To get back to the rest we left behind, we had no choice but to walk back to the movie theatre. As we walked, the sky started to brighten up.....

For some reason, that reminded me of the times of my youth.

About how I am still considered quite young, right.

After two hours.

I had collapsed on the bench in a state of apparent death. Just from walking a bit, my oxygen-starved brain had blanked out.....

Somehow, that made me thought of reality.

.....I have certainly aged.....

Good day, this is Iwai Kyouhei.

As I do not think I am allowed to share about how the personal life of an author has nothing but tears, allow me to append some additional explanation for this volume.

This series, 'Mushi Uta bug', is a series of short stories serialised in the magazine, 'The Sneaker', under the same name and collected into a volume. Episode 04 was an exception, it was newly written and thus had a somewhat different viewpoint from the rest.

As for the setting, this series recounts the events that occurred two years prior to that of the main series, 'Mushi Uta'. The characters from the main series will also appear here and there sporadically. However, due to past events, their personalities might be slightly different from how they are in the main series.

This 'bug' series will eventually converge with the main storyline, returning us to the start of the main series. However, there is definitely no intention of making this into, 'To understand the story, buy both!'. I hope to unravel the mysteries of the story in both the main series and the 'bug' series concurrently as much as possible, so that people can enjoy the series no matter which it is.

But, I do have a nano-sized bit of expectations after all, if you read both series, that would make me happy (lol). I would be glad if you are able to enjoy reading how the past and the present runs in parallel and connects to the future.

Since the serialisation began, I have received lots of support and constructive feedback. I want to thank Onai-san for overseeing the work, and also Yamaguchi-san for looking over the manuscript with such a fierce eye for detail. It certainly felt like being hit by a pincer attack..... truly the strongest steel comes from the strongest fire (to rephrase), it was under the help of the two of you that I was able to improve as a writer. Thank you very much.

And to Ruroo-san who delivered to us this beautiful art, I am under your care as always. I cannot repeat this enough. ....I am truly sorry to send you the original manuscript late all the time.....

And to the esteemed readers of this work, I pay my respects to you. Whenever I feel downcast, after reading a fan letter, I would regain my initial resolution and

feel motivated again. I will continue to do my very best.

Let us meet again in the next volume or perhaps in another way.

Iwai Kyouhei

# Notes

1.   ↑ “Oogui” means “big eater” in Japanese.
2.   ↑ “Mushi” is the Japanese word for “insect”.
3.   ↑ Dougi and hakama are types of traditional Japanese clothing, often used in martial arts.
4.   ↑ “Sensei” is a respectful way of referring to a doctor in Japanese. It may also refer to one’s master or other professions such as teachers, politicians *etc.*